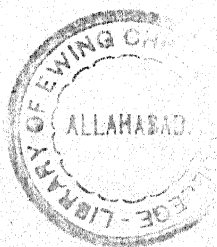


The
Indefinite River

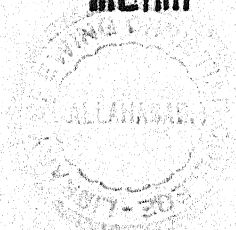




The Indefinite River

By PRESTON SCHOYER

Author of THE FOREIGNERS



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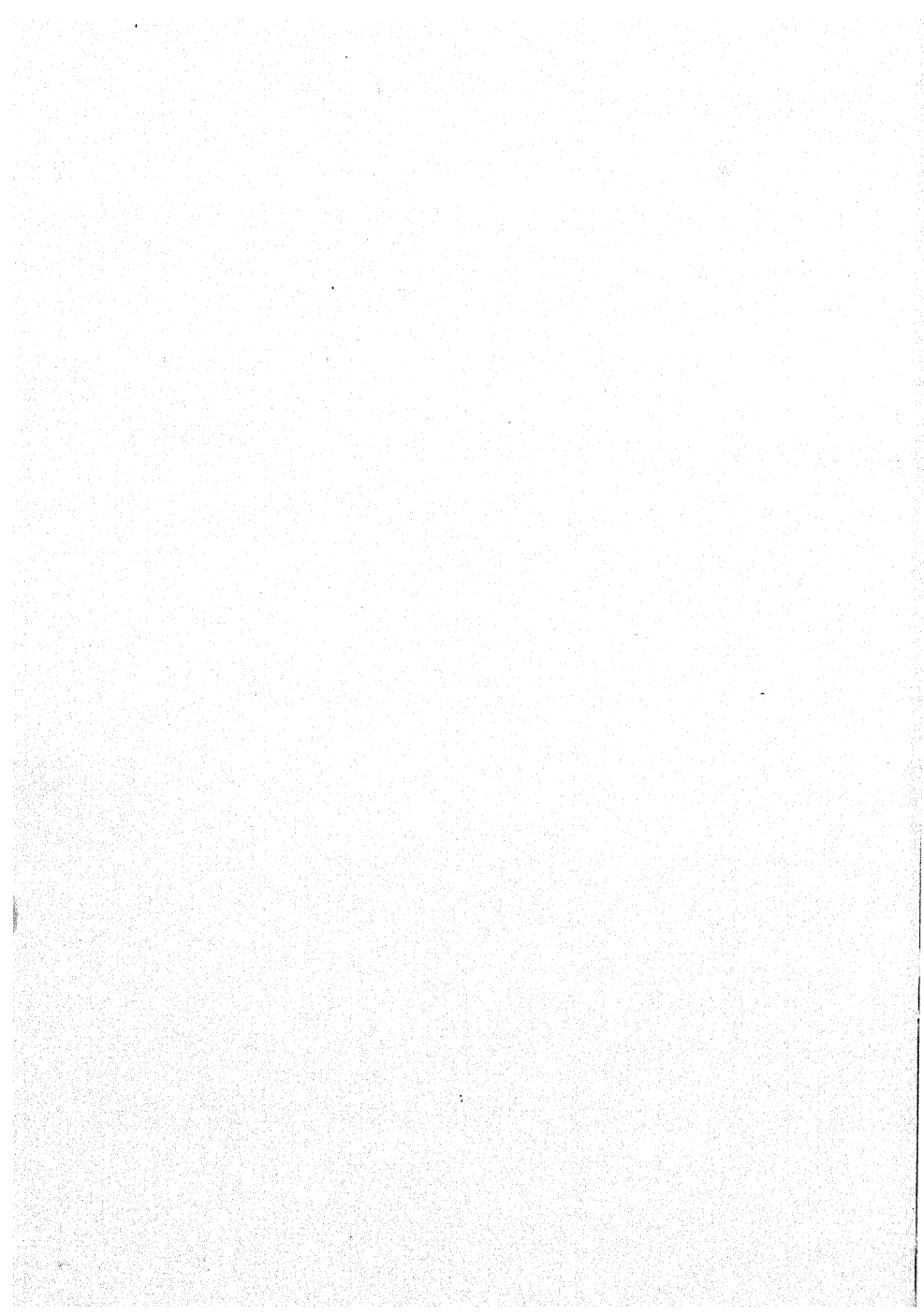
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In memory of E. S.





Contents

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	<i>Very, Very Secret</i>	1
II	<i>The Road to Wuchuan</i>	15
III	<i>The Girl in the Green Dress</i>	27
IV	<i>Cocktails with Maguire</i>	36
V	<i>Two Visitors</i>	46
VI	<i>The Colonel's Duty</i>	57
VII	<i>Under the Camphor Tree</i>	66
VIII	<i>The Irritations of Davis Russell</i>	81
IX	<i>Dinner for Major Crump</i>	98
X	<i>The Mist at Wuchuan</i>	114
XI	<i>Disheveled Men in Khaki</i>	130
XII	<i>Home by Christmas</i>	144
XIII	<i>The ABC Café</i>	158
XIV	<i>Chaos in Wuchuan</i>	170
XV	<i>Something in a Dream</i>	187
XVI	<i>Departure at Dawn</i>	204
XVII	<i>The House on Long White Elephant Street</i>	216
XVIII	<i>The Bus to Chiangkou</i>	230
XIX	<i>General Tso Entertains</i>	248
XX	<i>Old Red Beard's Visitor</i>	259
XXI	<i>Blood on the Snow</i>	269
XXII	<i>News from Hangchow</i>	282
XXIII	<i>Number Six Stone Horse Road</i>	296
XXIV	<i>Thoughts on a Train</i>	317



*The
Indefinite River*



CHAPTER I

Very, Very Secret

It was a cold, wet day in November, 1945, the cold and wet, having an excessively miserable quality peculiar to Shanghai. It scarcely mattered if it rained, though from time to time fitful gusts did sweep across the city, for the raw dampness in the air seemed to leak up from the streets at the shivering population as effectively as the rain beat down.

Such was the weather. But by its very bitterness it lent a contrasting air of cheer to the bar of the Shanghai American Club. A faint steaminess from wet clothing and the frail glow of lights combined to soften the grimy appearance of the walls, the worn furniture, the old bar that ran the length of one wall, so that the room caught a gleam, a semblance of its pre-war elegance. It was past one but the tables were still crowded, mostly with Service men, eating lunch; and their talk and the shouts of the whitecoated Chinese servants added to the cheerfulness.

It was a long narrow room, and next to the wall at the far end was a large table with places for five. Four were taken and the fifth chair had been tilted in to show it was in use. A cup of coffee, steaming slightly, awaited the occupant.

The men at this table were a mixed group. There was a Navy rating, a Marine, an Army major and a Navy lieutenant. Their uniforms were casual, for they were all China Theatre men—they had not come in from the sea—, and though uniforms were beginning to spruce up again now that the war was over, the disintegrating tolerance of China still had its affect. They all wore Army woollens, with the exception of the Major who had on faded summer khaki, very wrinkled. Neither the Marine nor the rating wore any insignia, and so were indistinguishable from the White Russian truck drivers who drove military supplies about the city.

They had been talking with animation through the meal, but

now were largely silent. They had been drawn together not because they were all friends, but because at one time or another all had lived in a remote little city in the mountainous interior, two hundred miles west of the American Club bar. The city was called Wuchuan, and each had vivid recollections of the place though none had really liked it. Wuchuan had been an isolated corner of a large Free China pocket, referred to loosely during the war as East China. East China was in turn isolated; there had been Japanese to the north and west and a hostile sea on the other two sides. Because of this double isolation, and because there had rarely been more than three of them in Wuchuan at one time, their lives had been shaped by the purely local character of the city. It was something special. And in recollection, this "something special" provided a unity of experience that had not existed at the time. Their jobs had been very different. The Major and the man whose seat was momentarily vacant had been collecting intelligence; the Navy men had maintained a supply depot for equipping Chinese guerrillas; the Marine had passed through a number of times on "observation tours" of the front. But those differences had faded in the sharper remembrance of the city and its life.

They did not understand this. They really thought they were there as friends. But having reviewed the past, having raked it over as thoroughly as it could be raked, they now found they had little more to say, and so were feeling disillusioned. The Major had some glimmer of the truth but he said nothing. He had spent less than a month in Wuchuan and regarded himself as the junior member of the party.

The conversation had also died because the senior member of the party, an Army captain, had done most of the reminiscing, and he was the one who had left the table. He had been drawn away by another officer and now stood deep in "shop talk" at the bar.

The Major, whose name was Peters, bent forward with a smile, and made a remark to the Navy rating, a Radioman named Nielsen. Nielsen, a thin young man with blond hair and rather sharp, quizzical features, somehow made the sharper by gold-rimmed glasses, put back his head and laughed. Lowering it again, he

moved it slowly from side to side.

"You can say that again," he muttered. "Oh, brother, you can say that again."

"I don't mean to insult him," said Major Peters. "I'm merely making a report."

The Navy Lieutenant, who had not been paying attention, looked up. He was stout, with thinning dark hair and a sallow complexion. His heavy face was undistinguished, except by a look at once puzzled and a little worried. It was not a passing expression but was fixed, set, with little creases of its own about his mouth and eyes. He now regarded Nielsen and Major Peters with a fuzzy look, as if he didn't understand them but felt he should. However, he merely regarded them. He said nothing.

The object of Peters' remark, which was derogatory, was the officer who now had the Captain deep in conversation at the bar. A Lieutenant Colonel by the name of Ernest L. Crump, he was Peters' superior officer as well as the Captain's. Peters resented his action in drawing the Captain away to discuss business affairs; he thought it unnecessary. He even thought it abusive; he felt vaguely that the Colonel was trying to make a show of authority at the Captain's expense. Nielsen had the same feeling, and this was the reason for his appreciative reception of Peters' derogatory comment.

Their resentment was out of proportion to the crime, but then it went much deeper than the moment. Neither liked the Colonel, but both liked the Captain. And they felt that the Colonel had contributed to the peculiarly bad reputation the Captain had made for himself in Wuchuan, so antagonizing the Chinese authorities that they had formally requested his removal, a rare request in spite of all the inter-ally bickering during the war. On top of this disgrace he had quarrelled with the Chinese military and had nearly lost a leg when a gun went off in the course of the quarrel. Peters blamed the Colonel only in part for the Captain's troubles, but Nielsen who knew the story through the distortion of hearsay blamed him completely.

The Colonel had not shared the Captain's disgrace. He had gone ahead, combining self-interest, a genial manner, a proper attitude towards Army procedure and a complete lack of imagination to

achieve a fair prominence and the congratulations of his associates and superiors. There was only this dark fringe of rebellion among those who had lived in Wuchuan. And even there it was confined to Nielsen, Peters, a few Chinese and the Captain himself.

To Peters it had always seemed strange that his colleague had made such a mess of things, and he now puzzled over it again. Davis had called it the inevitable progress of the inevitable—the Captain's name was Davis Russell—; but that did not explain anything. It was puzzling, he thought because Davis seemed unusually qualified for the work he had done, working alone with the Chinese, all kinds of Chinese, from officials to coolies. He was very well educated, quiet, and certainly had enough charm of manner. Of course, he had worried too much, was much too sensitive, but that had its value in dealing with the Chinese who were themselves over-sensitive. He was somewhat too fussy about details but that was unimportant. No, if the trouble lay anywhere in his character, and, God knew, there had been enough external problems, it lay somewhere on that incorruptible side of him . . . it was hard to see. . . .

Peters gave up the exploration with a shrug of his shoulders and turned to stare at the man in question, as if by drilling Captain Russell with his eyes he could uncover whatever it was he was trying to understand.

Nielsen also turned his gaze to the bar, but to the Colonel, not the Captain. "That man's a bastard," he said simply.

The Lieutenant looked up again. "What do you mean? Why do you call him a bastard?" But he was evidently unconcerned with his own question, for he added rather irrelevantly, "Why don't they come over and sit down?"

"In our office," said Peters, "any business is secret. Even the weather."

"But the war's over," said the Lieutenant, then laughed suddenly. "Or is that secret, too?"

"Not secret, just confidential."

The Marine, who had been stolidly drinking his coffee, bent forward. He was a powerful man with a heavy face. His name was Jablonsky.

"It's like in the war," he said. "Everything the Navy did in

China was secret. It was just to keep us from knowing too much. The Chinese didn't want us knowing too much. It was like a fellow I talked to the last time I come down to Wuchuan. Carey. It was like Carey told me when he first come out to East China, he was scared of going to sleep, in case he might say where he was going, what he was doing, and some coolie would run and tell the Japs. He come to Lungho by truck and somewhere he met a little Chinese fellow just going to school who wanted to show he could speak English and started asking questions. But Carey played very cautious. He don't know where his plane landed, he don't know where's he going, what's he going to do; he don't know nothing. So this little fellow thinks he's being mistreated and asks the Chinese truck driver and comes back and tells Carey he's going to Lungho to train Chinese guerrillas to blow up bridges on the Shanghai railroad. After that, Carey told me, he said to hell with it."

"It was just as secret at Wuchuan," said the Lieutenant; "and nobody told anybody to be secret. That was just the way Wuchuan was. On the surface it was so quiet, nothing to worry about. But there always seemed something going on underneath. There were always rumors." He laughed a puzzled little laugh. "But you know, when everything went to pieces last year, when the town was invaded, it was funny—there weren't any rumors." He shook himself as if to drive away something unpleasant. "I didn't like it. Wuchuan's a queer place. It always bothered me."

"Life bothers you," said Nielsen.

The Lieutenant laughed again, but did not reply. He was a strange man. His name was Paul. He had been born in China and knew the language; but China, like Wuchuan, bothered him. He had not wanted service in China, he didn't like it. The country eluded him as it eludes everyone, even the Chinese; but Paul, for no clear reason, took it as a conspiracy against himself. He was not articulate; he couldn't explain the feeling, he could only look puzzled and unhappy.

His eyes now turned to the two men at the bar. He smiled and began to nod his head. The Colonel and the Captain were coming toward the table.

"About time you came and sat down," he said as the two came

up. He did not agree with Nielsen. The Colonel was friendly on top of his air of importance; Paul admired that.

"Well, old Wuchuan," the Colonel boomed as Captain Russell presented him to the company. He was a large man, well-groomed, with dark red hair and a red face. Above his left breast was a row of ribbons. Though genial, there was in his manner a quality that gave the impression he had taken command of the table. The others had risen, and he indicated by gesture that they need not have bothered. The gesture pleased Paul, but irritated Nielsen and Peters. "Old Wuchuan," the Colonel repeated and shook hands round the table. "Nielsen, Peters, Lieutenant." To the Marine he said, "How do you do?" Then he smiled at them all. "Good old Wuchuan. Too bad the Japs didn't burn it, what?" And he chuckled heavily.

Nielsen had been studying the Colonel's ribbons and now pointed a finger at them.

"I didn't know about those, sir," he said. It was an odd remark and seemed to hold everyone still for a moment, suddenly fixing their expressions as in a photograph.

"What's that?" said the Colonel. "Oh, those," he added with a depreciating smile. "Just a little window dressing. Brighten things up you know." He chuckled again. "Have to look like somebody, even if I'm not."

"Anyway, congratulations," said Nielsen.

"Thanks," said the other. His expression changed, and he gave Nielsen a sincere and earnest nod. It was the same nod he had given the general who had presented the decorations; it had been appropriate then, but this time it seemed to hit something in mid-air and fall flat.

"It's very nice," Nielsen continued blandly. The expression on Peters' face grew suddenly wary. Paul looked vaguely uneasy. But the Captain, the Marine and the Colonel himself seemed unaware that there was anything unpleasant or explosive in Nielsen's developing remarks. "Captain Russell never told us. I'm glad to see they appreciated his work. He had so much trouble, I never thought they would."

The Captain's smile disappeared with a start, and his eyes narrowed at Nielsen in distaste. For a moment there was complete

silence. The Colonel's face had grown entirely blank; he simply stared at Nielsen. Nielsen still smiled, a slightly wooden smile. The Colonel himself broke the tension.

"Russell did a fine job," he said vaguely. "In spite of everything." And he turned to the Captain. "I've got to run. Want to see you when you get back. No hurry." His genial manner returned. He nodded to the others. "Nice to have seen you." And swinging about, he strode off through the crowd.

The Captain continued to regard Nielsen with distaste.

"What was that for? That was insulting."

Something stubborn grew in Nielsen's face though it colored slightly. "Yes, I know," he said. "I was thinking about insulting him, and suddenly it seemed like a good thing to do. He had it coming."

The Captain's distaste wavered, then collapsed. He gave his shoulders a slight hitch. "Oh, well . . ." he said slowly, his eyes on his coffee, then gave a little snort intended as a laugh. "Good thing . . . only just now . . . oh, well." And he gave his shoulders another hitch.

The others had resumed their seats, and Captain Russell cautiously followed their example. He lowered himself slowly, pushing his left leg straight in front of him. It buckled once in the process, and he winced, then smiled quickly to show there was nothing to the wince, nothing of any consequence.

Davis Russell was a small man of a strong, wiry build, but at the moment only his hands looked strong. His face was thin, rather too pale, and deeply creased. He had thin sandy hair, deeply receded at the temples, a wide mouth, a strong nose and chin. Not handsome, he had a friendly expression that gave his face a pleasant appearance, and his eyes were good. They were blue and deep-set, under dark brows much darker than his hair. And they had an arresting quality that gave his face distinction, a brightness and something quite gentle which seemed to react to whatever went on about him with unusual sensitivity. They could be shy or hard; they met any demand. They also looked tired, as if they had seen too much and wanted to draw away from seeing more. At the moment they appeared a little sardonic.

Nielsen had regained his composure and his expression was once

again quizzical.

"Why does the Captain keep on working for Crump?" he asked Davis. "I understand the doctors have ordered him home. And with a leg like that . . . why don't you wave it in his face? Why disgrace yourself working for him?"

Davis smiled. "The Captain wants to go to Hangchow," he said. "He's helping Colonel Crump so that he *won't* be sent home, so that he can get a chance to go to Hangchow."

"Why go to Hangchow? What's wrong with Shanghai?"

"I have no objections to Shanghai. That is . . . no, wait a bit. Yes, I object to Shanghai. I don't like watching the Government coming in here, looting their own people. I don't like seeing us fawning over their officials, giving them spiritual and material aid. You know what the local people are saying? They're saying, 'Oh, if only the Japs were back again.' And I should point out that we're included in their condemnation, and why not? We love democracy, *but*—" He paused and fixed his eyes on the Marine. "The *but's* the thing. It's curious, isn't it?"

He had not expected a reply but Jablonsky moved forward in his chair. "Yeh," he said. "It's like a fellow I know. He was out to one of these camps where the Japs put civilians during the war. That was September. It was when a bunch of B-29s came over dropping supplies fixed up in fifty gallon gas drums. They killed three Chinese, knocked down the kitchen, and smashed up half a dozen roofs. This fellow couldn't find no one to talk to 'cause they were all down in the air raid shelters, the women and children crying, all scared to death. Then a little old man comes shooting out of a dormitory so mad he couldn't talk, and shakes his fist at this Army fellow 'cause he thinks he done it. This old man looked like he was covered with glue, only it was canned peaches. He was laying in bed when one of these drums busts into his room and exploded, so him and his room was all covered with canned peaches."

Jablonsky paused and Davis nodded appreciatively.

"Yes, I heard about that."

"I was just going to say," the Marine concluded, "what this fellow said. He said after the Army leaves Shanghai it will be just like that camp after the dropping mission, all busted and splashed up with tomato juice and peaches."

Nielsen turned to the Captain. "And that's why you're going to Hangchow?"

Davis smiled. "No. No, I'm going to Hangchow on business. It's very, very secret. I can't tell you." He looked at his watch. It was time to get back to work. "Very, very secret." He rose slowly from his chair. The others were ordering more coffee, and pressed him to stay. But he shook his head, and with a final smile at the company walked slowly away.

When he reached the front door of the club, Davis buttoned up his coat with a slight shiver and peered out at the cold and wet, then stepping to the street, headed east in the direction of the Bund, walking stiffly. His smile of a moment before was still there, but it had no life, it was only a shell; and in consequence he appeared tired and old.

Absently saluting an M.P., who returned it with a startled look, he moved into a large office building. It was full of American officers and men, coming and going. At the moment he disliked them all. He disliked the fat insensitive Chinese who ran the elevator. He disliked the fat little Portuguese girl, who sat in the outer office, her dead white face moving up and down on a piece of chewing gum with the irritating precision of a machine. And yet he knew he had no right to dislike them. They were what they were; it was not their fault. This snarl he felt, they had nothing to do with it.

For a moment he stood before his own desk and looked out at the rain falling on the gray roof across the way.

He would have to check this irritation, or he couldn't even be civil to Crump. But why, wherever he went, did Crump have to draw him aside to discuss some damn fool triviality. . . . He must curb it, must be civil. Crump would call it "war nerves," he thought with a wry smile. Sarah would, too, and she would be very sympathetic, which would make it worse. . . .

He drew in his breath, picked up a pencil and walked down the hall to a door that bore the name, "Lieut. Col. Ernest L. Crump." As he opened the door the Colonel looked up from his desk.

"Oh, Russell," he said. "Come on in. Be with you in a minute."

Davis sat down and waited as the Colonel finished something he was writing. For a moment his eyes moved over the neat, orderly room, with its gleaming files, the carefully arranged papers. At last

they settled on the Colonel, and slowly they grew sardonic.

He was like the room, Davis thought. His neatly parted hair, and his healthy florid face, cleanly shaved, the neatness of his uniform, and the genial quality of his smile, all combined to give the same glowing impression, the impression of such efficiency, such devotion to duty. The total absence of any intelligence he could call his own did not show when one had such glittering virtues.

"I'll tell you what I want, Russell," the Colonel said briskly, sitting back at last. "Theatre Headquarters wants a report on Chinese who collaborated with us effectively during the war—a sort of Who's Who, some comment on their history, nature of their co-operation, personality, that sort of thing. And, obviously, you're the man for East China. Shouldn't take you long. Just a broad picture, only the real stand-out people, and they're damn few."

Davis shrugged his shoulders.

"Why not get Larry Brown to do it. If you want broadness, he'd have a broader picture than I."

"Yes, I know, but frankly, Russell, you know Brown." Crump's tone was flatteringly confidential. "Between us," said the tone, "you're a far better man than Brown."

"Well, Brown's better than no one," said Davis, his voice sarcastic.

Crump's face fell into the same blank stare that had distinguished it when Nielsen had tried to insult him an hour before.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Colonel, I'm through," smiled the other. "When I wrote the last report you said that was the end. So now I think I'll go back to the hospital, and get sent home. And, incidentally, I shall have no objection to their writing the General as to why in hell you haven't sent me home. None at all."

The Colonel's florid face remained expressionless.

"But I thought you wanted some leave to go to Hangchow?"

"I do, but I've been here a month and it's always next week, next week. So what's the use. I might as well go home."

"I'm sorry, Russell, but this is an emergency. Theatre wants it by next Monday. That gives us only a week."

"Why don't you tell Theatre to think up a brighter idea. You know well enough nobody gives a goddam what it's about. There's

no danger of anybody ever using it. All they want is something nice. Something very nice."

"All I know is I've got to have it by Monday," said the Colonel, suddenly authoritative and commanding. "I've said I would. We've run an efficient office, Russell, and I'm not going to let down now. No, by God, we carry on to the end. I mean that, Russell. I'm not just making a speech."

"Yes, sir," said Davis, still smiling, then sat abruptly forward in his chair. "All right, Colonel," he added briskly. "By God, I'll do it."

"Good," said the Colonel, with surprising lack of curiosity at the other's sudden change of mind. "That's all I wanted to see you about."

"Oh, no, it isn't."

The Colonel looked blank again.

"Colonel, you amaze me," said Davis, relaxing slowly. "You want something done, and you neglect the *pith*—" he lingered on the word—"the pith of the problem. You know that my old assistant, Maguire, is in Hangchow. I've told you I'm only helping you so that I can get down to Hangchow to see him. In fact, I couldn't write the report without Maguire's indispensable assistance. So if you want the report send me to Hangchow. Otherwise, no report and I return to the hospital; and the hospital will give you hell for disobeying their orders." He flung out his hands. "After all, I'm your baby."

"Well?" asked the Colonel.

The other stared hard at the Captain, as if by superior will he could draw some further and wholly improper motive from the plan.

"You'll have the report here by Monday?"

"I will have it here by Monday."

"All right. All right," said the Colonel fussily. "I'll see you get your orders. Send Sergeant Smith in."

As Davis opened the door the Colonel called him back. His eyes had been following the Captain with a vague, puzzled expression.

"What the devil was that Navy man talking about?" he asked abruptly, as if they had been discussing the subject for some time.

"Neilsen?"

"Yes, what did he mean about your doing a good job?"

Davis shrugged his shoulders. "He's been in China too long."

"That's what I thought. Queer sort of fellow. Too bad. They ought to send him home."

Davis was about to speak; his mouth opened, but closed a moment later and he softly shut the door. There was no use twisting a knife in the Colonel, he mused; he wouldn't even feel it. That was the bliss of ignorance.

It was a murky day and the overcast was down to three thousand feet. Still, the flight was on. Hangchow reported four thousand and there was no rough weather in between. Pilots were touchy those days and one could hardly blame them. The war was over. They took chances enough considering the planes they flew. Davis had talked to the pilot a few minutes before, a lieutenant with a twitch to his tired face. The plane was an old Troop Carrier ship. There was something wrong with the hydraulic system, but he thought they would have no trouble; anyway, he hoped they wouldn't. "She should have went to the scrap pile last August," he commented drearily. "I wouldn't even give it to the Chinese." That, he seemed to think, presupposed the last word in physical deterioration.

As Davis sat by the window of the canteen drinking coffee, he could see what appeared to be an endless line of planes, parked on the cement aprons, mostly four-motored transports, their aluminum bodies glistening in the dull light. The pulsing roar of motors warming up reached him dully.

Sight and sound took him back into the war, way back to the early days before East China. To Kueilin and Kunming—the roar of planes, something wrong with the ship, but they would take off anyway. He had the same feeling now, a vague tenseness; there was almost a pleasure in it, the sense of never knowing what was around the corner, and a sense of danger.

He regarded his image in a glass behind the counter with sudden distaste. This nostalgia for the war, it was certainly ironical. The more so in his case. And yet there it was.

Another face came into the mirror, and a hand touched his arm.

"Guess we'll take off," said the tired-looking pilot. "I've got a jeep outside."

That was another familiar thing. The casualness of the Air Forces. There had never been any real organization, it seemed, unless it was in reverse; a conspiracy, fostered by clerks in passenger terminals, to prevent him from catching his plane.

The plane was, he thought, all it should be, an old C-47 with its brown war paint peeling off. Something Troop Carrier Squadron—he couldn't read the number. Everything fading that had once been the beginning and end in the personal history of millions of men. The fuselage was a confusion of old parachutes and assorted cargo: mail, cigarettes, "B" rations. He sat in back listening to the whine of the starter, then the bursting roar of the engines. Through the little window he caught glimpses of planes slipping by; he never had been able to tell where he was going when the plane taxied.

As the motors roared for the takeoff, and the ship, trembling violently, gathered speed, he was aware of moisture on his hands. It had always been the takeoff that had bothered him, never the landing. Just now he felt more pleasure in the recollection than worry. The cabin door was open and swinging crazily. Beyond it he could see the radioman bent over the pilot, a cigarette in one hand, talking casually. At that one moment the crew always assumed an Olympian stature. He and they and the plane were a private world, disassociated. And in that world pilot, co-pilot and radioman were God, their unconcern a thing to wonder at. They were the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. The radioman was the Holy Ghost.

He smiled irreverently. The roughness below the plane stopped and the ground and buildings began dropping away. He could feel the pull as they banked slowly. Then as the plane settled to an even course, the motors subsided to a smoother, less urgent roar. The ground below was gray and brown, a checkerboard and the most intricate of checkerboards. Off to the east the towers of Shanghai showed faintly in the haze, then faded as he watched.

He sat back with a sigh, and lit a cigarette. It was pretty good fun. He glanced again at the earth below. It was very hazy now, the ricefield patchwork almost invisible, dull and unreal. There was no reality save the plane and its destination and the soupy air between.

He didn't think that, he felt it. In his mind Hangchow was still

a vague, nightmarish dream, as it had been when he had passed through two months before, sick and delirious. He had not thought of it in terms of the feel of his shoes on its street stones, the sound of the wind in the willows on West Lake, the smell of roadside kitchens; but now the city came alive. And with that sense of reality, an excitement, stronger than the nostalgic pleasure in flying again, agitated his face.

"... it is not certain," Maguire had written, "but Buttercup thinks she is the one. He saw her at a small hotel near West Lake. If I get some more information, I will let you know. . . ."

That was the real irony. The war was over in August, but he was still fighting. Of course, Hsiao Laopan was dead; there at least the war was over, his defeat irretrievable. But Nina—if only she had not changed, if only they had not done anything to change her.

It was ironical and paradoxical. Paradoxical because everything that had happened was very natural, so natural that it was hard to reconcile the beginning with the end.

He smiled faintly at the thought.

The accumulation of events that flowed between was as inevitable as the flowing of a river from its source to the sea. And yet in his case the flow had never reached the sea—just spread out in a sort of tangled morass. He remembered he had even sensed that it would be so. Long ago, a year and a half ago, when he was on a trip, when he was coming back to Wuchuan in the jeep, the time Maguire had urged him to hurry. Everything had been going smoothly then, smooth as silk. And yet there had been some presentiment of trouble. He was alone in the jeep, and it was in that wasteland stretch, that reddish eroded country west of the Wuchuan valley. It was curious how vividly he remembered because it was such a small thing. And yet it had significance because he had been right and it was just then all the trouble began. Still it was curious to remember so clearly. It was June and very hot. He could even remember the warm dampness of his shirt against the back of the seat, and the chafing burn the hard canvas gave his skin as the jeep rattled and bounced over the dusty highway. And a man standing motionless by the side of the road. . . .

CHAPTER II

The Road to Wuchuan

ON A morning in early June, a year and two months before the end of the war with Japan, a jeep could be seen bouncing along a dirt road in the province of Chekiang near the East China coast. The only occupant of the jeep was an American Army officer. On his face was a fixed, brooding expression.

He had never liked this part of the road. The red hills with their sparse scrub pine baking in the early summer sun, and the choking dust—he could feel it caked on his face now that the sweat had dried. He could feel it in his mouth, gritty and dry, mixed with the sickly sweet taste of alcohol, fuming back from the motor. As always he thought he knew every turn in the road and as always there were a hundred new turns he did not remember so that it seemed interminable, the mountains and the green valley somewhere ahead to the east forever beyond reach.

He had seen but one man, a farmer standing by the roadside, in the past half hour. If he had not known the area, he might well have been uneasy. It had the deathly emptiness of a countryside just before the invading tide of the enemy swept in. The hills around him were themselves like a tide, an army moving by, ghosts of the Chinese dead in slow retreat. The nearby hills passed at a quick jog while the mountains in the distance moved with slow grandeur, as if on horseback; these were the regimental commanders, their heads bowed in eternal resignation to despair. Yet they seemed to warn him back; what right had he to burst through their ghostly ranks, to face the enemy alone, one David against those Philistine giants, who had laid them low?

Their despair fitted the sounds about him. There was the squeaking rumble of the jeep, the queer pulsing of the motor, and the rattle of the empty gas tin strapped behind; past his ears came the rush of the wind, and from the road the murmur of tall reeds,

the hard clatter of stony embankments and the soft intermittent whisper of the pines; and now giving consonance and harmony to the whole was the rise and dip of the road itself. It was a disturbing symphony, in keeping with the landscape, harsh, disconsolate and full of foreboding. And as the hills grew taller, he had a sense of being drawn into them inexorably, powerless to escape some unknown calamity lurking ahead.

He stirred suddenly, relieving an ache in his left leg, took a deep breath and compressed his lips. At the same time he gave his head a shake, as if to drive away the mesmerism of the road and the gloomy wanderings it allowed his mind.

It was no good worrying, he thought; there were a hundred possibilities. He had only to wait another three hours to know the whole story.

And slowly the strain in his face diminished.

He was inclined to worry, and a message he had received two days before still disturbed him. He was then as now on his way from East China Field Headquarters to his own lonely outpost at Wuchuan on the edge of the Japanese lines. He had stayed the night at a Navy Station in Fukien Province, and the Navy had given him a message from Lieutenant Paul, who was in charge of the Navy supply depot in Wuchuan. The message said simply:

"For Captain Davis Russell. Maguire says urgent return at once."

It had seemed odd to him because he was on his way, and could hardly have arrived much sooner. It was clear that Maguire was extraordinarily upset, if the delay of a day or half a day was so important.

Maguire, he had told himself, was of course easily upset. His name itself showed that. Maguire was Chinese. His real name was Hsiung Li-ping, but to hide his identity in radio messages and courier dispatches he had, himself, adopted the alias Maguire. Davis always called him Maguire, simply because it was so inappropriate.

At all events, Maguire's message had disturbed him, and he had driven on from Kienyang in a great hurry. Normally, he would have had lunch in Pinghsien with Father Fogarty, but on this occasion he hoped to reach Wuchuan by that time.

The moment of relaxation did not last long, for soon his eyes grew fixed again and his brow knit. Then the fingers of his left hands left the wheel one by one to enumerate the possible explanations of Maguire's uneasiness. But they soon came back to the wheel, not because he gave up the probing but because the fingers were unable to cope with its complexity.

Most of his surmises and speculation centered on Wuchuan, the City of Five Streams. A small city, it hugged a mountainous corner of Northwest Chekiang. In normal times it was a sleepy town, concerned with trade in silk and tea, and resistant to change. Once, years before, it had boasted electric lights; but like a sick man incapable of too rich a food, it soon spewed up the innovation and returned to the softer light of lamps fed with camphor oil. Not even the violent sweep of the war had affected its quiet, old world existence. But when the war had lost its life and movement, settling into a condition rather than a conflict, Wuchuan found itself invaded by forces too powerful to resist. Admirably situated for the smuggling trade through the lines, the town was quickly invaded by hard-bitten business men, *t'ou-chi-feng-tze*, as the Chinese have it, "opportunists" of no scruples whatever. Prices rose. The city's restaurants and hotels bulged. The luxuries of Shanghai gleamed in the rough stalls of its market place. Girls in flowered silk rubbed shoulders with ragged country women; and at night amid the clink of wine cups and the rattle of mahjong chips their laughter tinkled sensually from behind dark walls. And behind those same walls men whispered, intrigues grew, lives were marked or struck off as on a balance sheet. And in this new, hard, glittering opulence Davis found a never-ending source of information concerning the little brown enemy on the other side of the lines.

In Wuchuan he moved of necessity in official circles; and from merchants who came and went "over the border"—and it was a border far more than a front—from them he knew that in Wuchuan's dark and opulent activities the officials were as deeply involved as the *t'ou-chi-feng-tze*, sucking at those activities with all their power and privilege. For this reason he instinctively avoided inquiring into Wuchuan's personal affairs, lest the officials take alarm and use their power to block his sources of information. He was alone there, except for the two Americans at

the Navy Supply Depot, and so all too conspicuous. And he knew that his business, even though directed at the enemy, its nature, the very word "intelligence," disturbed the officials. And so it was necessary to avoid knowing anything about local affairs, to play dumb and look the other way, to smile the smile of hypocrisy, as Peters at Field Headquarters put it. He disliked it, but that was the game.

He got on well with most of the officials, but there were several he disliked. One of these was General Chien Ming-ih. It was unfortunate because General Chien was the top official in the city, commanding the Wuchuan Garrison and the local Border Defense Corps; and his headquarters should have been the city's most lucrative source of military intelligence. But in fact the General's information was slipshod and inaccurate. Davis felt the General simply did not care. He could see that at best General Chien tolerated him as an unwelcome guest, a snooping outsider who had to be watched and kept from knowing too much. Whenever he talked to General Chien, who was a huge, gross man with a cold indifference of manner, he had a feeling that behind those small, half-closed eyes the General was thinking to himself:

"Why have you come among us to stir things up? Everything is peaceful out here in East China. We live in a pocket surrounded by the Japanese. There are Japanese on the sea and along the coast, there are Japanese along the Yangtse River, and now there are Japanese up and down the Canton-Hankow Railway. But they don't bother us. We fought them for six years. Now we are exhausted. We have a tacit understanding; we do business over the border. Why not?—we need the goods; and it softens the Japanese. Now they have no desire to go to the Pacific to fight your honorable countrymen. It is quite ingenious; in this way we sacrifice to help you.

"But maybe you are not really interested in the Japanese. We don't admit this, but we think about it all the time. We think you are more interested in our corruption, in our over-border trade, in our distaste for fighting the Japanese. Perhaps you want to report us to Chungking. This is too troublesome. You force us to watch you, to investigate your activities, to give you carefully arranged information that will do us no harm. Perhaps we will even have to

obstruct some of your activities. This is really a burden. Why not leave us alone? You will learn nothing here. You will only stir things up."

Certainly something of that sort moved through the old man's mind. And that was why Maguire's message brought his thoughts to bear on Wuchuan, on the situation there and on General Chien. There was no change in the war situation. Possibly one of his agents in enemy territory might have had an accident, but that seemed unlikely. It was not the sort of explosion that would have upset Maguire. It was trouble with his own people that disturbed Maguire most. And so inevitably his suspicion settled on General Chien; and there were others at the General's Headquarters, General Mao for one. Their Border Troops had twice arrested his couriers and bullied them into paying for their freedom. The incidents had seemed a normal brigandage. But, as Maguire had suggested, they might have been part of a plot to discourage him and force him out of the area. Maguire's present alarm could come of some similar outrage, but probably one of far more serious proportions.

His hands moistened at the thought; he drew in his breath and swore softly.

The irritating thing about the situation in Wuchuan, he reflected, was its unreasonableness. People like Chien and Mao had no real insight, or they would see that he had no interest in their affairs, that it was unnecessary to pretend they were still fighting the Japanese. And yet, even if they knew he knew better, he had a feeling they would still obstruct his work by seeking to control it, still maintain that the War of Resistance was a reality. It was in their blood, a habit, a disease.

He took a hand from the wheel to gesture his complaint to the hills. But the hills and the road moved on without comment, intent on leading him down into the dark abyss he had brooded on a moment before—this queer feeling of impending disaster, the mountains closing in ahead. The glare of the sun on the barren hills and the dusty red road seemed only to make the feeling darker. There was a darkness in the glare itself.

Another solitary figure came into view at the side of the highway. His head was turned away from the jeep and he held a cloth

before his face. He remained motionless in that posture as the jeep whirled by, and peering back Davis watched his dim form vanish in the cloud of dust that trailed the car.

It seemed to him curious that there should be anyone in that desolate stretch rather than so few. He felt a sympathy for the solitary figure, as if the man were doomed to wander forever in its waste. At least *he* was moving on and though the end was darkness and disaster, at least there was an end.

He remembered the curve ahead, the sunken bridge, and the gray farmhouse behind the hill. Beyond the bridge the road rose into the mountains that had been moving in so inexorably. Sword grass crept up to the roadside, then gave way to pine and huge cliffs of purple rock. The road rose tortuously. He passed a long train of carriers, their sweat-drenched backs straining under the ropes of wheelbarrows laden with tea and cotton. As he rose and the air cooled, his depression faded. Below him lay the wasteland he had just traveled, its erosion patterns gathered red and yellow into nothing more important than an Oriental carpet. Then the carpet was gone and he was moving up the side of a ravine between two massive mountain shoulders whose very enormity tugged upward at his spirit. A cool wind blew from the pass above. Terraced fields of rice rose high on one slope, their sculptured lines following with exquisite grace the contour of the land. Above them the pink walls of a temple lay back against the mountain, ancient, serene, asleep in the summer sun. The air was no longer hot and lifeless but came to him fragrant and alive with the taste of earth and rock and pine. A sweep of the road as it moved into the pass brought a glimpse of a dark rocky peak lost in a misty cloud, incredibly high above. Then he was in the pass; and at the side of the road he stopped the jeep to drink from a trickle of mountain water splashing from live rock, cold and clear and uncontaminated by cultivation.

Above him the wind whistled in the tall grass. He turned to face it, so that it pressed his wet shirt to his body with a delicious coolness; and there beyond the eastern end of the pass, spread out below him, lay the green land, the green cultivated valley that rolled eastward to the City of Wuchuan and the giant mass of the Lin Shan, the Mysterious Mountains. At once the sense of impending disaster grew quickly remote, and in a moment vanished altogether.

It was only Maguire, he told himself. And climbing behind the wheel, he let the jeep roll forward. It was some small trouble Maguire had magnified or imagined. There were always new problems. And though he worried about them, they were exciting. They were his work; he enjoyed them. And in tune with the jeep's jolting rumble he began a cheerful song, the lament of the British in Pucheng:

"I don't want to be a soldier, I don't want to go to war.
I'd rather hang around Picadilly on the ground,
Living off the earnings of a high born lady. . . ."

An hour later the jeep was moving smoothly along the straight highway of the valley. In the distance to the east the ragged mountains that ringed Wuchuan rose up clear and blue in the noonday sun. Lower mountains that fringed the southern and northern horizons were all but obscured behind nearby hills. They were strange hills, formed of huge black rocks, not ragged but rounded and softened by the years; and the years had made them softer still with tall hardwood trees and feathery groves of bright green bamboo. Between the hills were little glens, down which sparkling streams murmured and moved out to the river that flowed through the heart of the valley. Now, in early June, at the joint of spring and summer, it was a quiet river with clear blue water and broad banks of gleaming sand. River junks, their white sails slack in the faint stir of air, moved along the water-way with slow majesty. The valley itself was as flat as the sea; and at times, where long vistas opened to a hazy distance between yellow-walled farms and huge shade trees, it seemed possible that one could see the slow curve of the earth itself.

On the road life stirred once more; farmers with empty wheelbarrows back from market, travelers with sweaty faces, their baggage swinging in cloth bundles at the end of carrying poles; delicate ladies in colored silks who retreated in a panic at the white dust trailing the jeep, handkerchiefs clasped to their noses; a country ricksha lurching along on wooden wheels, in it a fat merchant lolling back asleep, his mouth open. This road was hard and smooth. Gone was the variety of sound; there were only subdued rattles and the pulse of the motor.

It was a curious country, he told himself; it could both attract

and repel with equal vigor.

Slowly his thought came to Sarah. He had thought vaguely of returning to China after the war, but he could never quite fit Sarah into the desire. Sarah would object to China because it was slow and mediaeval, but even more because it wasn't clean, wasn't sanitary. Still, if he insisted she would come, and as in Connecticut, she would always be cheerful and uncomplaining. She was really a remarkable person, very efficient and well—well, of course, he had to go home and he knew somehow he would never get back to China. The pleasant unexciting life he had always known would engulf him, and so—well, anyway, it was enjoyable to think of what might be.

He smiled to himself. After all in a year he would be forty, in eleven years fifty. It was a boy's idea to think of starting life over again at his age when he had a decent position, a pleasant home and a loving wife, his life definite, secure. He missed having no children, but he was reconciled to that. You either had them or you didn't; and as Sarah would say, if you didn't your capacity for happiness found other channels.

Another side of him now smiled. That was very like Sarah. She would put everything just that way. However, what did it matter? Sarah was certainly good to him, and he was very fond of her. And once home it would be easy to forget. What depressed him most was the thought of going back to Brown, Burbank and Brown, to the slow grind of the law—"greasing the wheels of industry" as old Burbank was wont to say. Mere thought of greasing those wheels filled him with dismay.

"Well, don't think of it then. Think of Wuchuan," he said aloud.

And thinking of Wuchuan, he grew sober, remembering the urgency of his return. Something wrong in Wuchuan. And for an instant that dark sense of impending disaster came back with startling clarity.

It was foolish to worry, he told himself; and yet he knew he always would. It came with age—the descent into senility. But he knew it was also his nature, the effect of his past environment—the softening influence of an unworried, completely secure existence in a quiet Connecticut town, and the influence of a family that was sensitive, refined, withdrawn from the struggle. He had

never struggled, never fought, never in any important measure met any test of his ideals. And now that he was harassed by raw, harsh forces, it was discouraging to see how too sensitive he was, how too easily disturbed, because at his age he could see that it was too late to expect a change. "I can't denature myself," he thought. And yet he knew it was foolish to worry because his work was going well enough and there was no way of knowing whether it might go better. The work was too personal. He asked questions of people in Wuchuan, of people from the Japanese areas; he sent men of his own to those areas and asked them questions by radio. And so the work was simply a problem of getting the most out of the sum of the personalities involved; and no one could get the most, nor would ever know what the most was. He knew that; but it did not help him—he worried all the same, and with an harassed driving energy struggled at his job. There were moments when he thought he might explode under the strain; but he never did, for when the going was roughest his intelligence, like a safety valve, would suddenly allow him to sit back and view himself and the world about him with an almost amused detachment.

The road curved to the left, moved down between two rising banks and there ahead of him was the Shih-tze Ho Ferry. He slowed the jeep, blowing his horn as he did so—for the ferry was on the far side of the river—, and came to a stop a few yards from the water's edge. As he climbed stiffly from the car, he could feel the heat grow around him. He walked back and forth a moment, easing the aches in his cramped legs and back. Then he leaned on the jeep and peered down at the river. Known to him only as the Ta Kiang, the Big River, it flowed eastward to the Chien Tang and so to the sea. Upstream across its wide expanse he looked into the mouth of a smaller stream, coursing white and with a pleasant murmur over a stony bar that almost blocked its channel. This was the Hsiao Ho, the Small River, his river, for it came from Wuchuan and gave that city its life. Just now both streams were quiet, cool, inviting; and as the mountains had dissolved his foreboding, so the water dissipated his present gloom.

Raising his eyes, he squinted into the shimmer of heat rising from the opposite bank. In answer to his horn, a half dozen men were trotting down the road to the ferry boat from a village a quar-

ter of a mile beyond. He could see their legs disappear in the heat waves, giving the impression they were running through water. "Mirage," he murmured aloud.

Then he glimpsed his face in the side mirror of the jeep. It was caked with sweat and dust except around his dark eyes. He did not notice it, but in hiding the slight graying at his temples, in softening the creases in his lean cheeks, the dust gave him a strangely youthful look.

He walked at last to a small open hut at the side of the road where several people were drinking tea. Taking out a handkerchief, he wiped unsuccessfully at the caked dust and wearily puffing out his cheeks, found a seat on a wooden bench. Turning to the old woman in charge, he asked for a cup of tea. The old woman regarded him soberly, screwing up her weak, red-rimmed eyes, then turning to a farmer, said something in a cackling laugh. The farmer, who was staring at him blankly, nodded without smiling. Davis returned this scrutiny a moment, then switched his gaze to a man of evident means, for he wore leather sandals, flannel shorts and a silk shirt. With one hand the man waved a large palm fan, and with the other nibbled at watermelon seeds. His face was round and smooth, and the gleam of sweat accentuated the ripple of muscles in his cheeks as he ate. Davis stared hard. Now that he was accustomed to the facial qualities peculiar to the Chinese, he no longer noticed those peculiarities; and frequently he saw faces that reminded him of people he knew at home. This man looked familiar, though he could not think who it was he resembled. Then he grew aware that the other was smiling at him and punctuating the smile with abrupt nods.

"You speak Chinese very well," he said in surprisingly good English when Davis nodded back.

"I only said 'tea,'" Davis remarked. "It's not hard to learn one word."

The other threw back his head and laughed more noisily than Davis thought necessary.

"Oh, you speak very well," he repeated, still laughing. "Where do you go?"

"I go to Wuchuan."

"Oh, very good," said the other, wagging his fan. "It is quite

good, I think. But not so safe."

"Why is it not safe?"

The Chinese leaned close with the important air of a man about to impart highly confidential information.

"It is because of the *Hsien-fei*. You know what is *Hsien-fei*?"

Davis gave his head a barely perceptible nod. "Communists," he said, a faint gleam in his eye. It always amused him, the term *Hsien-fei*, "Border Bandits." The officials in particular seemed to like it. They were very secretive about the Chinese Communists, very loath even to mention the subject. He never could understand it. There were pockets of Communists here and there, and occasionally they clashed with Government troops; but the official secrecy about them, this distaste for calling them Communists, seemed silly and unnecessary.

The man returned the nod, and his fan rose to the side of his head, strengthening the confidential nature of his information.

"There is some bad trouble above the border at the north. Not so bad just now. But—you know the Tai Hu and where is Chang-hsing and Anki?—now the *Hsien-fei* grow quite strong." He had drawn his face into a look of exaggerated seriousness. His brow was contracted and his mobile mouth drawn down at the corners. "It is quite serious," he said emphatically. "Someday they will come down—" His eyes opened wide and he made a sweeping downward gesture with his fan. "Someday."

He drew back with a satisfied look and examined Davis with half-closed eyes to see what impression he had made.

Davis nodded slowly, his eyes sober. Something wrong in Wuchuan, Maguire's message—it might be the Communists. Yet it was difficult to think so. They were too few, too quiet, too far away.

"Could be," he said at last. "Could be."

The ferry was drawing into shore.

He finished his tea, then pulled his damp shirt away from his body and blew into it. He was getting hot again. He could feel little rivulets of sweat moving down his chest. Rising, he bowed to the Chinese.

"Thank you," he said absently.

In another forty minutes the land began to rise slightly and he was in low hills, hills covered with graves. He glanced at his watch.

A few minutes before one—not so bad. Then the hills moved away and off to the north across the Hsiao Ho he could see the white pagoda of Wuchuan, a small tree growing from the crumbled stones at its top. The city beyond to the east was hidden but on the hillside behind the town he could see the end of the bridge, and a huge camphor tree that marked the steps up to his Temple. He always felt he should be able to see the Temple from that part of the road, but he never could.

CHAPTER III

The Girl in the Green Dress

WUCHUAN had long since overflowed its crumbling walls; and as Davis approached the city, dirty little shops and new hotels, gaudy with red and blue paint, crowded in on the motor road. Then came the Bus Station with several ancient vehicles at the back of the yard. Beyond the Bus Station the shops and tea houses and the strolling crowds grew thicker; and at last ahead of him loomed the square stone tower of the West Gate, its top graced with a red pavilion. The tower was green with age, grass grew from cracks in its ancient stones and the tunnel through it was dangerously narrow. He had to bring the jeep to a snail's pace to avoid crushing the never-ending stream of people against its damp stone walls. It was always cool inside the tower and as always the old paving stones were wet with the splashing from water buckets.

Inside the Gate more shops, larger shops dark with age and smelling of tea, crowded the cavernous street. It was a busy thoroughfare, full of noise and bustle; and with blue and white awnings, drawn overhead to keep out the heat, it had a gay carnival air. This was Hsi Chang Kai, West Long Street, Wuchuan's main artery—it was East Long Street at the other end of the city. He drank in the carnival and the aromatic smells with warm approval, but in a moment turned left toward the river down a narrower, quieter street that came quickly to an end. Just ahead was the old city wall, and in it an open archway through which stone steps sank to the Hsiao Ho. Through the archway he could see the river sparkling in the sun and several women squatting on their haunches, skirts pulled back, pounding their washing on large flat stones. Beyond them two naked boys splashed in the clear blue water; at the water's edge, excited by their play, a dog barked furiously.

To the right at the end of the street, drawn back a dozen feet

from the Chinese houses about it, as if afraid of contamination, stood a huge gray brick building that rose forbiddingly above the surrounding city. Above the doorway leading into this imposing structure was a sign that bore the English legend, *Navy Hostel*. Davis glanced at the sign and crawled stiffly from behind the wheel. He nodded at a Chinese soldier guarding the door, and the soldier drew uncertainly to attention.

Beyond the doorway was a wide corridor that led to an open court where a forlorn peach tree drooped lifelessly above a well. Reaching the court, Davis paused, listening to the chatter of Chinese from a kitchen at the far end of the building. From above him somewhere he could faintly hear the sound of a gramophone:

“—don’t sit under the apple tree with
anyone else but me,
anyone else but me . . .”

“Phil!” he shouted. “Nielsen!”

“Anyone else but me, anyone else but me. . . .”

A Chinese appeared at the kitchen door, smiled with recognition and pointed to the top of the house. With a quick nod Davis turned into a dark hallway and started up a twisting flight of steps. Above him the gramophone grew louder.

“Anyone else but me . . .”

It seemed determined to hang onto that phrase, but an instant later with an abrupt screech the music stopped altogether.

A voice called out: “Who’s that?” Then a blond head appeared in a doorway at the top landing. A stream of light from a narrow window above the landing drew a little gleam from the man’s gold-rimmed glasses, and shone on sharp, quizzical features.

“Oh, hi, Captain!”

“Hello, Nielsen,” said Davis. “Just back.”

“Any mail?”

“A little. It’s in the jeep.”

Nielsen took a step toward the stairs, then paused. “Any cigarettes?”

Davis shook his head.

"Well, those bastards!" Nielsen turned and bent his head back into the room. "Hey, Phil, Captain Russell is back, and you know what? Kienyang never sent us those cigarettes."

From somewhere beyond the door came a muffled explosion, and to Davis' face a slow smile. It was the same everywhere; back through the chain of command—the Army, the Navy, the Airforce. It was a war of bitterness in echelon.

"Phil's out on the verandah," said Nielsen, then ran down the stairs muttering to himself.

The large room beyond the door had a queer metallic smell that came from a cluttered collection of radio equipment that filled one corner. It was an untidy room, strewn with worn magazines and orange peelings; Davis who liked order disliked it.

Reaching the verandah door, he ran into a stocky man with thinning black hair. Dressed only in khaki shorts and a pair of slippers, he looked comfortable though his pink, hairy body gleamed with sweat.

"Oh, Davis—come on out," he said. "It's cooler out here. Come and have a beer."

He shook hands uncertainly, and led the way to several worn wicker chairs. Though genial enough, there was an unhappy, puzzled expression on his heavy sallow face.

A bamboo matting shielded the edge of the verandah from the sun's glare, and there was a faint breeze. Below them lay the river, and by stooping a little Davis could see the bridge a quarter of a mile upstream to the northeast, and on the hillside beyond it the camphor tree, and a part of the roof and terrace of his Temple. It looked serene and peaceful, and the sight was reassuring.

He turned to take the bottle of beer the other held out, leaned back against the verandah railing and regarded Lieutenant Paul with amused interest. "Poor Phil," he thought. It wasn't his fault. It was the Tai Li people who kept him mystified. That was the danger in getting too close to any one Chinese organization.

The Navy cooperated with the Government guerrillas and Secret Police, both of which were under the control of a General Tai Li. In effect the Navy was, too.

"It's Japanese but not bad," Paul was saying, then stared hard at Davis. "My God, you're filthy." And he broke into a harsh,

heavy laugh, which suggested he saw no reason to laugh but simply felt it was expected of him.

Davis smiled vaguely. "How did you get this so cold?" he asked, his eyes on the beer.

"Just put it down the well. I've got a dozen bottles, straight from Shanghai."

Davis nodded absently. Then his eyes narrowed a little.

"Why are you sending messages for Maguire?"

Paul looked up quickly.

"I didn't want to send that message." There was a querulous tone to his voice. "I told Maguire you'd get excited." He threw out his hands. "But you know Maguire. He came sliding in here like an old spider with that black hat of his pulled down over his face."

"Did he tell you what it was about?" Davis interrupted.

"Something about a pilot down in enemy territory. You're supposed to do something about him right away."

Davis stared, his mouth open, then laughed weakly, hunched his shoulders, spread out his hands helplessly, and shaking his head, sank slowly to the floor, his back to the rail.

"Was that all? Was there nothing more than that?"

"That's all he told me."

"I don't see why he had to be so secret and urgent," said Davis.

Paul shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. But he kept begging me so I sent it. He's like all these people." Though born in China, Paul always called the Chinese "these people." Peering uneasily at the river, he tilted his head a little, as if listening to the confused noises of the waterfront, and wondering what they were all about. "Like all these people," he repeated.

Davis stayed at the Navy Hostel for lunch so that they could question him about the outside world, but he was soon exhausted and the conversation grew desultory.

When he rose to go, he paused a moment, looking thoughtful. "Are there any rumors about the Communists?" he asked suddenly.

The other two stared at him, Nielsen blankly, Paul with vague alarm.

"The Communists?" Paul asked. "What about the Communists? Is there anything wrong?"

They were eating on the verandah, and Davis stared off at the hills across the river, considering the question. "No," he said at last. "Nothing wrong. I just wondered."

"What makes you wonder?"

"The Communists."

"What do you mean?"

Nielsen put down his fork with some irritation. "He means the Communists make him wonder about the Communists. It's very simple."

Davis laughed. "Phil, I'm just curious. That's all." He moved to the door. "I met a Chinese at the ferry who thought there might be some trouble—some day." And with a wave of his hand he turned into the house and trotted quickly down the stairs. He was glad to get away. There was always a petty bickering at the Hostel that bored and depressed him. He felt sorry for them; they had too little to do.

Driving the jeep back to West Long Street, he turned east toward the bridge, and quickly reached the center of the city and a large square known as Ta Shih-tze, the Big Cross; for here West Long Street crossed Wuchuan's second most important street, Tien Mu Ta Lu, Celestial Eye Great Road, which connected the South Gate with the North. The North Gate existed only in name, for it had been torn down when the street was widened to move without interruption over the old stone bridge across the Hsiao Ho.

He had to move slowly in the square. In spite of the sun it was crowded with a jostling throng, with slinking, evil-eyed dogs, with pigs grunting and squealing their way to the river, and with a hundred vendors' stalls hidden under colored awnings. The very shouts, the smells, the red gleam of sliced watermelons, the yellow silk of a lady's dress, the tinkling sound of music from a peep show—the very atmosphere of Ta Shih-tze seemed to slow his progress.

As he turned into the broader traffic lane that marked the course of Celestial Eye Great Road through the Square, he caught a glimpse of a pretty girl in a green silk dress. She was leaning on the counter of a cigarette stall, her eyes fixed on him with a grave intensity that drew his attention.

There, he thought, was a pretty girl. He supposed he had seen

hundreds of pretty Chinese girls : pretty noses, pretty eyes, pretty teeth, lovely skin ; and yet none had roused him in the least. Their beauty and their manners were too foreign. But this girl was different, perhaps because she was vaguely familiar, like the man at the ferry. He supposed it was that, and perhaps it was increasing adjustment to China. He supposed if he had always lived in China, he would have found western women unexciting. Perhaps that would be true when the war was over and he returned to Robin Hill.

At the northern edge of the square he stopped the jeep. In the last stall before the bridge were a dozen red kerosene lamps. Climbing from the jeep, he approached the stall. An old man, naked to the waist, rose from a stool and grinned at him, bobbing his head energetically.

Davis pointed a finger at the lamps. "How much?" he asked in Chinese.

A small crowd, the inevitable, curious Chinese crowd, grew around him.

The old man mumbled something that he could not grasp, then began drawing figures in his left hand with his right forefinger.

"Seventy dollars," someone in the crowd volunteered.

"Ah!" cried the old man, nodding agreement.

Davis drew out a four hundred dollar note and said he would take five. The old man looked at the note and began mumbling again, gesturing at the lamps. This time no one in the crowd came to his rescue, and smiling helplessly at the old man, he began moving the lamps to the jeep when a voice startled him.

"Can I help you?" asked the voice in careful English. It was a pleasing voice, soft and clear.

At the left of the stand was the girl in the green dress. To see him beyond the crowd, she had bent slightly over the edge of the counter in a way that gave prominence to the womanly qualities of her slender figure. It was partly her figure and also her dress, he decided. The one was in fine proportion, and the other did not deny it, unlike the shapeless dresses most Chinese women affected. But her face also had an unusual quality. Her dark eyes and her dark hair were brown, not black ; her skin very white, her straight nose slightly aquiline, and her chin firm, not recessive. He smiled

suddenly—it was the portrait in the library at Robin Hill; as he remembered it, they were identical. The same hair, the same dark grave eyes.

"Thank you," he said at last, suddenly aware that her gaze was wavering before his studied scrutiny, and a faint color coming to her cheeks. "I wish you could help me. I want to buy five of these lamps but I can't understand what this man's talking about."

She said a few crisp words, and the old man explained elaborately.

"He tells me," she said gravely, "the five lamps will cost three fifty, but he will give you six for four hundred."

"Tell him I'll take the six."

She translated with the same gravity, the man laughed and handed over another lamp.

As he took it, Davis turned to the girl, his expression curious.

"You are not a native of Wuchuan?"

"No, I am a Soochow person. But I came here from Changhsing. I am just waiting in this place."

"Do you have friends here?"

"No, I do not have any." She paused, her eyes searching into his. "It is very difficult."

"Is someone coming to get you?"

"No, my husband is in Chungking. Now there is no way to go because the Japanese have taken the railway in Hunan. Before, it was my thought to go to Chungking. Just now it is too bad because soon I will have no more money."

She made this speech without change in her quiet manner, as if her plight were of no more importance than the buying of lamps.

He stared at her uneasily. It had always bothered him; the Chinese custom of doing a favor in expectation of one in return. But all the same he said: "I might be able to help you. I don't know. Would you let me know your name?"

"It is Lee," she replied. "In English it is Nina Lee. I live at number five, next to the Tai Hu Hotel. You know where it is, I think."

She came up to the jeep as he climbed into it.

"You will let me know?" she asked quietly. She held herself erect, her shoulders very straight, and this carriage enhanced her air of dignity and reserve.

He bowed in response, then glanced at her hand which she had placed on the side mirror of the jeep. It was small and soft and white, but there was a curious desperation in the way it clung to the mirror. He turned his eyes to hers, half-expecting to see in them the same desperation, but her face was perfectly composed.

"Yes, I will let you know," he said.

The hand dropped away as he released the brake. The jeep moved forward and in a moment he was on the bridge. He had to squint his eyes, the river was such a dazzling blaze of light. At the top of the bridge, where there was a little pavilion archway, a peanut seller called his name.

"Yueh Hsien-sheng has come back," he croaked.

Davis smiled, touched the visor of his cap, and drove on. Beyond the bridge was a village, but in a moment it gave way to country again, and he was skirting the river's edge at the foot of forested hills. Below the towering camphor tree he had seen from the distance west of the city was a narrow driveway that ran up a steep ravine to the left of the motor road. He turned into the driveway, putting the jeep in low gear. Above him white egrets rose from the camphor tree and with complaining cries sailed off across the river. On the other side of the driveway the steep hillside moved upward through trees into what appeared a battlement.

As the jeep moved up the ravine, shouts drifted down from the ancient stones above. In a moment the drive twisted back on itself to rise past a brick wall with a graceful curved roof high above. A smiling guard running ahead of him drew back a gate at the end of the steep roadway, and he rose into a flagstoned courtyard with a tall pine tree in its center. At the back of the court, against the hillside, stood the Temple, a long rectangular building with splendid red pillars and a golden tile roof. The Temple faced south across the court to a low stone wall. Beyond the wall lay the river and the city and to the west the broad valley he had just traveled and to the east dark mountain peaks.

Crowding around him were half a dozen Chinese, all smiling and bowing: George Huang the radio operator, Maguire, little Miss Chen, the old cook, the houseboy Ching—all but the two coolies and the cook's wife who did the laundry. Just behind them a small boy, the cook's son, jumped up and down, clapping his hands.

"Mister Yueh has come back!" he screamed in a paroxysm of excitement.

Davis looked over the heads of the others and shouted "Bath!" at the small boy.

The boy turned and ran out of sight chanting in Chinese at someone unseen:

"Mister Yueh wants a bath! Not too hot, not too cold. Not too cold, not too hot. Mister Yueh wants a bath!"

Davis relaxed and stared at the Chinese who were all talking at once. He smiled, and they smiled back. A rumble of thunder sounded in the distance; he peered through the trees, now stirred with a faint wind from the east, and caught a glimpse of darkening clouds drawing near to wash and cool the land. His smile broadened in anticipation. Then he pointed a finger at one of the crowd, a tall thin man with a dark complexion.

"Maguire," he said, "can you wait till I get a bath?"

The other nodded without expression.

CHAPTER IV

Cocktails with Maguire

AT THE far corner of the court from the driveway, built out over the hillside, was a small pavilion. On its stone seat, looking fresh in clean clothes, a glow on his face, sat Captain Davis Russell, a collection of radio messages in his hand. He had read the messages once, and was now surveying the world. A cool breeze stirred in the wake of the thunderstorm that had passed over, rustling the branches about him. Like the Captain both earth and sky had a clean, washed look. The sun was drawing close to the earth's edge, and the quiet valley glowed pink. From the pavilion he could see in all directions. Through the camphor tree across the ravine he could see the setting sun itself. Above the Temple he could see the ridge of the hill and off to the east the stony crags of the purple mountain country that hung over them so gigantically. There was still a huge thunderhead above the mountains, like an enormous ghostly Buddha, piles of cloud faintly blue with distance and so gradually evolved from the deep blue sky below as to have no apparent beginning.

From behind him came the pulsing whine of the radio generator and from the city a soft murmur, the collected sound of fifty thousand voices. Also in the air was a pleasing flower fragrance from the hillside below, and a fainter yet equally pleasing fragrance of roasting chicken from the cookhouse behind the Temple.

He drew the fragrance in with a deep breath, took a sip of a cocktail, a drink made of local rice spirits and lemon drops melted down, and returned to the messages in his hand. But his eyes rose in a moment to peer at Maguire who was hurrying toward him from the driveway.

Davis spread out his hands. "I rush back to Wuchuan at your command," he said genially, "and then you disappear."

"Yes, I know," said Maguire. "But Mr. Pao just came back and

is leaving tomorrow, and he has some good information about the Japanese defenses at Chapu."

Davis nodded, then pointed to the small pitcher beside him. "Cocktail?" he smiled. "A glass of this and you might live longer."

"No, no!" And Maguire forced a nervous smile.

He sat down awkwardly, the long fingers of his right hand, stained dark brown from tobacco smoke, playing uneasily with a cigarette.

"Why do you say live longer?" he asked, looking anxiously about him and dropping his voice. "It is not a joke. I tell you,—" his voice dropped lower still—"perhaps my life is in danger."

The words seemed to hang in the air, at odd variance with the quiet beauty of the evening. The face of Captain Russell, half-smiling a moment before, grew sober, his eyes questioning. Maguire watched him intently, his own thin face gloomy and disturbed. The Captain was a slight man, not as tall as Maguire, but he looked robust by comparison. Maguire was thin to a point of emaciation. His black suit hung on his frame as it might on a clothing rack, his bony knees and shoulders making the sharpest sort of indentations in the thin cloth. His dark face had deep hollows, made the deeper by the prominence of his cheekbones and his long hooked nose.

Just now his black eyes searched the Captain's face for some show of reaction to his curious remark. And for a moment the evening world grew suddenly, mysteriously quiet, as if it, too, were waiting for the Captain's reaction.

"About the pilot," Davis said at last. "There is something more, isn't there? I supposed there was."

"Of course," said Maguire, his manner strangely blunt for a Chinese; and he rubbed a hand over his close-cropped head. "Or why would I ask you to come back so urgently?"

"Well, what is it?" Davis asked, his eyes wary.

Maguire again peered about him, at the Temple, at the kitchen quarters where the servants were talking noisily again, at the radio house, at the city.

"Two nights before yesterday a man came to see me," he said slowly, his voice lower still. "He wanted to see you but you are away. He seemed very worried about this. He wants me to tell you

to come back right away. But I told him I cannot do this unless I know what is the reason. So he told me what it is. He is the one who brings this news. You see, the pilot did not come down recently. He has been there since April. His plane crashed in the Tai Lake early in April."

"Been where? Where is he?"

"Across the border, near Changhsing. That is why you must come back urgently. This messenger comes from Changhsing." His next words were without sound but Davis could read them on his lips. "He is a Communist."

Davis did not smile as he had at Paul; and when he spoke his voice was subdued.

"Then the pilot is in the hands of the Communists?"

Maguire gave his head a slight nod.

"Did he tell you anything about the pilot?"

"Yes, this man said he is very important; he is chief of an airforce."

"Airforce?" Davis murmured absently. There was a lieutenant colonel missing in the Shanghai area, a group commander; but all inquiries had drawn a complete blank.

"What was his name?"

Maguire consulted a notebook.

"This man could speak only Chinese but in Chinese it is *Peh-li-shih-ki*."

"That's it," said Davis, raising his hand. "Blakeslie. That's the one."

"The pilot is no matter," Maguire continued. "You must understand that. It is this man—his name is Lin—and those people. You see, just after this man comes here, one of the Secret Police, not the Investigation Bureau, but the Kuomintang, the Party police, came to see me. Perhaps he knows about this man, and it would be very bad for us if the officials think we have any connection with a Communist."

"Where is the man now?"

"He is waiting somewhere in the city. He will come tonight because certainly he will know you are arrived. And this is very bad. It is very dangerous for all of us. I mean it. Sometimes if somebody is just suspected to have a connection with those people he can be

shot. Really, it is too dangerous."

"Did he tell you he was a Communist—this Mr. Lin?"

"No, of course not, but he must be because he told me three times he is not. He just said he was a merchant."

"Why didn't he bring the American with him? Why can't they send him to the border where the Government troops can pick him up? The Jap outposts are at least five miles apart. It should be easy enough."

Maguire's restless eyes regarded Davis curiously, as if surprised he should ask such a question. "It is not so simple," he said at last. "The Communists don't want the Government troops to get him. They want you to go and get him, or send someone from your office with a letter. You see, they want to make some connection with you, to get some American cooperation. Perhaps you will help them. That is what they hope." Maguire drew in his breath and stared hard at Davis. "But you cannot do it," he said slowly. "It will destroy everything."

Davis nodded without answering, his gaze fixed on the pink, sunset-flooded river and the lengthening shadow of the bridge.

"I think it is better this way," Maguire went on even more slowly. "We will just tell Mr. Lin you cannot do this kind of business and they must make some other arrangement."

But Davis shook his head. "No, we'll have to do something. And, anyway, as soon as I tell Headquarters where Colonel Blakeslie is, they'll order me to get him out. It can't be helped—*meiyu fatze*."

Maguire made no comment but gloomily shook his head. He pulled at his thin nose, ground out his cigarette with a fierce little gesture, rose quickly, walked to the wall, threw the cigarette away, then turned suddenly.

"It is too dangerous. I can tell you frankly, in China it is worse to have some connection with those people than with the Japanese."

Davis stared impassively back at the excited Chinese. "I know it's dangerous," he said earnestly. "But I will have to talk to this merchant friend of yours; and if I can help Colonel Blakeslie, I will have to help him. But if you want to stay out of it, I can ask George to help me."

Maguire stared in sudden alarm. "No, no, I will do it," he said at last, as Davis knew he would. George was a good radio operator; but he loved to talk and loved to drink, and once drunk had no sense for the security of secret information, a danger that constantly worried Maguire.

Maguire's agitation now fell away, his narrow shoulders drooped in resignation. "But it is too dangerous," he mumbled almost inaudibly, and grumbling to himself, walked stiffly away across the courtyard.

As Davis watched him stalk into the Temple, his own face grew cloudy. He recalled vaguely the sense of doom that had oppressed him in the morning. He knew Maguire was right—it *was* dangerous. But there was no one else to do the job. The officials would be worse than useless, even if the Communists had no objection. Officially there were no Communists, only Border Bandits and one did not deal with bandits.

He smiled at the ludicrousness of the situation, took another drink and felt better.

An egret landed with a flash of white wings on the ridge of the Temple. He stared at the bird a moment, then let his eye wander along the ridge and out along a curving gable to the little gargoyles at its end. They were grimacing as hideously as possible at the unseen spirits that forever filled the Chinese heavens. But they were not very hideous really. The terror they were intended to instill had been softened by age and weather. They were now only amusing, and very handsome in the graceful flourish they lent to the exquisite curve of the roof.

His eye came back to the egret and he noticed with a smile how much like Maguire the bird was, long and thin with a long beak and an air of worried caution. With Maguire's dark glasses it would be hard to tell them apart. "Poor old Maguire."

He said this with amusement, but there was affection in it. He and Maguire had been together from the start. There was Maguire in Wuchuan and Jimmy Wang in Shanghai; they were the cornerstone, the rock on which his work was founded. They had come out to East China with him, and each was very loyal to the other. He did not know why they were so loyal; but Maguire could have told him, as he had told George, when George joined the staff:

"Captain Russell is somewhat quiet and does not say if you do a good job," instructed Maguire, "but he will never be impolite and treat you like a servant, he will always treat you like a friend." And this to the Chinese was more important than any other qualification.

Davis stirred, lit a cigarette and blew a puff of smoke at the egret, then came back to the messages in his hand. At that moment the whine of the radio generator stopped, and a door slammed. Startled, the egret lifted its neck, and with a great flapping of wings flew off to the camphor tree. His gaze followed the bird a moment, then turned in the direction of the radio house, which was built over the garage against the east wall of the courtyard. A sound of steps echoed hollowly from the open stair at the back.

In a moment Miss Chen, clad in a simple blue cotton dress, came into view. She approached him shyly, and when he returned her smile she blushed. Averting her eyes, she handed him a message.

It was not important, and he put it with the others, then turned to stare up at her with obvious pleasure. He liked Miss Chen. He liked her because she was plump, pretty and always had an air of freshness, because she blushed so easily and because she was cheerful and uncomplicated. He never had to worry about Miss Chen.

She had come to them through George Huang, having lived with him till the arrival of Mrs. Huang. George had then suggested her as a code clerk, and she had worked out very well. As she knew no English, only the alphabet, she was able to handle all his messages, secret and confidential as well as unrestricted. She was apparently undisturbed by the loss of George, which was not unnatural as the arrangement had been prompted chiefly by a desire for security, and her job now gave her that. With Maguire she was very polite and formal, as he was with her. It always amused Davis to watch them. He had a feeling that underneath the ceremony Maguire was in love with her.

As he continued to smile up at her, Miss Chen blushed a second time, then burst into voluble Chinese. Absently, he took the message from his pocket and would have given it back to her; but she laughed, frowned, blushed again and pushed it away.

"Something else?" he asked in English.

24621

She always talked to him in Chinese and he could understand very little of her Chekiang dialect, and yet she always appeared to think the next time he might. This habit of hers amused him and he rarely bothered to stop her, but this time he had just thought of something he wanted to tell her.

He collected the right Chinese words in his mind.

"Call Mr. Hsiung to come," he said slowly.

She stared a moment, then ran off to the Temple. When she came back, Maguire strode along behind her.

"She says that there is one more message but it's garbled and George wants her to wait till he gets a repeat in the morning. Is it okay?"

"Okay," said Davis, then held them both with a wave of the hand.

"Maguire, I wish you'd tell Miss Chen—this concerns you, too—"; and he informed them of the girl he had met in Ta Shih-tze. He asked Miss Chen to pay her a call and find out more about her. They needed another hand in the office, he explained, and Miss Lee might do very well, very well indeed. "You had better investigate her pretty carefully," he warned Maguire. "There was something about her that was a little suspicious."

He knew what it was but he could not put it into words that sounded reasonable, the curious way she had gripped the mirror of the jeep. But quite aside from that he wanted to say he was suspicious; it was necessary to clear himself on that point or Maguire would assume the full burden of suspicion, and the girl would not get a fair trial.

"Where does she come from?" Maguire asked.

Davis squinted his eyes, trying to recollect. She was a Soochow girl; that was not her home, however. Then he remembered, but the recollection made him cautious. Changhsing, he thought; he was sure she had said Changhsing, and at this point it would not do to tell Maguire she came from Changhsing. He hated these small deceptions, in particular he disliked cheating Maguire; but at times that, too, was the game.

"I think she comes from Soochow," he said.

Maguire smiled, a ludicrous, coquettish smile that had no place on his sombre face. "In China Soochow girls are considered the

most desirable. They are very pretty and their speaking is very tuneful."

"Very tuneful," Davis echoed. "But I think her accent was North China. That's quite suspicious."

"It is not suspicious by itself," said Maguire.

"It isn't?" said Davis, and his eyes sparkled. He could see that Maguire was now on the girl's side. "Have a cocktail, Maguire?"

But Maguire withdrew protesting it was time for supper. Davis followed more slowly, still amused. It was his intention to inspect the property, to see how it had fared during his absence, and he now turned toward the kitchen quarters.

At the east side of the Temple he paused to stare at the radio house. It was painted black and merged with the pines on the other side of the wall; but even so it was an eyesore—utilitarian enough, but the proportions were bad. He shook his head and switched his gaze to the servants' quarters at the back of the court.

When Davis had left college, it was to become an architect. He had studied architecture for two years, then the depression had taken both his father's life and money, leaving him alone in the world, for his mother had died when he was a school boy. It had also robbed architecture of any immediate future; and he had gone to work in his uncle's law office in Hartford, studying law by night. He had never liked it, but family tradition insisted he be a professional man; and as that was the line of least resistance, he had fallen into it by decree of fate. But his early love held, and as with Robin Hill, so with the Temple—he liked building things, anything. It was his one real relaxation.

There was the shower, the radio house, the latrine—it was a very model latrine—; and then there was the guard house at the back gate, the Temple furniture, and of course the Temple itself. The Temple was not properly a temple, though the Chinese called it that. It was a Memorial Hall, which he had rented from the Ningpo Guild. There had been a huge hall which ran to the roof, with a wing at each side, each with two rooms. He had divided up the hall into five rooms and put a papered lattice work ceiling over them of red bamboo. There was a storeroom and a dining room for the Chinese in back, and two guest rooms in front, opening on the porch between the two wings. The front room of the west wing was

known as the Telephone Room, and was a general office. Behind it was Maguire's office; he had chosen the room himself so that he could keep an eye on visitors as they came and went up and down the drive. The east wing belonged to Davis, and so did the room just inside the wing. This room was the living room; it ran from the porch to the back of the Temple, and was used for official functions. Its chief adornment was a large fireplace, which he had designed. He was proud of the fireplace. There were two smaller ones in the east wing, and all three used the same chimney.

Now, as he stared at the kitchen quarters, he was debating whether or not to build a wall across the court from the east side of the Temple to the back of the radio house, and so hide the kitchen and servants' quarters from the rest of the grounds. But before he could make a decision, his reverie was disturbed by Ching.

Ching came bursting round the corner of the Temple, as if life were an urgent matter, and at the center of that urgency he the busiest of men. But he merely wished to announce that dinner was ready.

It was served on the porch, mosquitoes being rare at the Temple, the view pleasant. He ate alone, not for form's sake, nor for privacy, but in deference to his stomach; he found the cook's Chinese food greasy and unpalatable whereas his foreign dishes were excellent.

It was too bad, he was thinking sadly as he took up his soup spoon, that there was so little left to do to the Temple. His day of diversion was about done. And perhaps it was just as well—work was piling up. In another month there would be no time for diversion.

When Ching appeared with the soup, Davis stared hard at his white gown. One thing he could do, he thought, was to buy Ching a new white gown.

"Ching," he said. "Buy yourself a new gown and give me the bill."

Ching considered. "Okay," he said, "but just now cost too dear. Everything too high." And he screwed his round, bright-eyed face up into a look of elaborate disgust.

Ching had been a Shanghai houseboy, and he viewed the interior

with distaste; he felt that barbarism should at least be cheap, and Wuchuan prices outraged him.

When he had gone Davis stared off across the river, conscious of a sound of clashing cymbals and a roar of voices, as if far away a mob were howling through the city in angry protest at the rising cost of living. There were always strange commotions in the city; he heard them most often at night. But he could rarely discover what caused them. "Somebody marry," Ching would invariably observe; "Perhaps it was a funeral," Maguire would suggest.

Then a distant shot rang out, and for an instant a smile played across his face. At least he could understand that.

Whenever Nielsen grew bored he would take a shot at passing egrets, at the lantern in the pavilion on the bridge, whatever took his fancy. Such was the ennui of existence in Wuchuan, where conspiracy and intrigue were the day's most abundant commodities, where nothing ever happened, where life moved on in tumult, and nothing ever changed.

CHAPTER V

Two Visitors

CHING had brought the coffee and a dish of sliced oranges. And Davis was reflecting, as he frequently did, on the incongruity of eating peacefully off a white cloth, deep behind enemy lines with the Japanese less than thirty miles away. "Behind the enemy lines"—what ironic drivel that was if one stopped to think about it!

His eyes moved suddenly and narrowed into the fading light. At the western end of the courtyard he could see a dark figure silhouetted against the golden sky. The man was aimlessly peering over the stone railing, balancing first on one foot then the other. Advancing toward the table was Ching, a card in one hand.

"Some man," he whispered noisily. "Mr. Lin." He consulted the card. "Mr. Lin want to see you."

Did he know a Mr. Lin, he wondered. Then he remembered—the "merchant" from Changhsing—, and told Ching to call Maguire. It amused him that Mr. Lin had escaped Maguire's eagle eye. It was specifically to catch such suspicious visitors as Mr. Lin that Maguire had taken the room at the northwest corner of the Temple.

Davis waited a moment, then rose, unable to stand the surreptitious glances he and the visitor were exchanging across the court, and retreated into his office with his coffee.

As he looked back through the door he saw Maguire hurrying across the court toward the stranger. He bent and lit an oil lamp that brought a neat, well-appointed office into view. The furniture was of polished sandalwood; there was a grass rug on the floor, two logs in the fireplace, and several maps on the wall. It had an air of comfort and orderliness.

A gentle knock sounded at the screen door.

"Come in," he said, and taking an ashtray from the desk he emptied it in the fireplace.

The door swung open and Maguire ushered a short, stocky man into the room. He had a strong face, the typical broad peasant face of Central China, and a short neck that made him appear hunched. His head was shaved clean and shone faintly in the lamplight. His blue cotton suit was of the Sun Yat Sen style, the jacket buttoned up to the neck.

Davis glanced at Maguire, who was wearing his dark glasses; and Maguire gave his head a slight nod which plainly informed him, "This is the man." Aloud he said:

"This is Mr. Lin." And in Chinese, "Lin *Hsien-Sheng* this is Captain Yueh Shih-Li."

Davis held out his hand. The other started to bow, then stepped forward awkwardly and seized the hand.

He smiled broadly as he did so, showing strong teeth and a wide expanse of gum.

"I was getting some tea," Maguire was saying. He was obviously disturbed at failing to intercept the visitor. "I was getting some tea," he repeated as Davis' eye met his.

Davis nodded absently.

"Shall we talk here?" he asked.

"On the Pavilion is more safe," said Maguire.

Davis nodded again, and let Maguire lead the way.

In the Pavilion Davis offered Mr. Lin a cigarette, and with an abrupt little bow he took it; but after it was lit he did not smoke it again. It made Davis feel that Mr. Lin was nervous.

"Tell Mr. Lin that I hear he came to see me about Colonel Blakeslie, and tell him I appreciate his kindness in bringing this good news."

Maguire adjusted his glasses, which he still wore in spite of the darkness, and turned to the visitor.

Mr. Lin listened impatiently, nodding his head in quick abrupt movements. He then edged forward in his seat and began talking rapidly in a subdued voice that was curiously thin and hoarse at once.

"This is the way it is," said Mr. Lin. "This Mr. Blakeslie is very anxious to arrange that he will be returned to his airbase. Just now it is not possible because the Communists are unwilling to turn him over to a Chungking outpost. They are afraid the Secret Police

will kill Mr. Blakeslie and then blame the Communists. And there may be other troubles. But if Captain Russell will send a representative to them with a letter, they will give Mr. Blakeslie to the representative."

He paused to clear his throat. Across the river lights were beginning to show in the dark. Davis wished he could see Mr. Lin's face.

"They want Captain Russell to send an agent," Mr. Lin continued. "They do not want the Government to send an agent. This is quite clear. They are afraid a government agent will be something else, perhaps a spy. Also, they do not like to arrange a middleman to give Mr. Blakeslie to the Government forces. They think the Government forces will make use of the chance for propaganda, or anything. This is my thinking."

"But if I do not send an agent?"

"Then they will try some other way," Mr. Lin replied promptly.

"But why didn't they send Mr. Blakeslie south with Mr. Lin?"

Mr. Lin replied as quickly as ever, waving his cigarette as a sort of baton, so that it made little orange circles in the air.

"They do not know me. I am just a merchant. They do not suspect anything bad about me, but they do not know anything good about me. So how can they trust me?"

"Please ask Mr. Lin if he would be willing to be my representative, and bring Mr. Blakeslie to Wuchuan. Naturally, we would pay all expenses and of course would pay Mr. Lin for his services as well."

Mr. Lin moved forward another inch.

"Let me explain to Captain Russell. This situation is very delicate. I must be very careful about going to Changhsing. And just now I must go to Tunki. Anyway, it is better for Captain Russell to send a true representative because he is protected by the American Army. With the American Army there is nothing to fear. The best thing is for Captain Russell to go himself. Then there is no trouble at all."

He leaned close, and his voice dropped low. "It would be very interesting, I think. I am only a merchant. I do not know about fighting and politics but I can tell the Captain, these people are not bad people. If someone goes to their area it is more easy to do

business. He does not have to pay some squeeze every place to the officials."

"What about the Japanese?"

"The Japanese are no matter," Mr. Lin said quickly. "There are only a few, and they stay in the city. They are afraid to go to the country because of the Communists."

Mr. Lin then fumbled in his pockets and in a moment produced a scrap of paper, the torn half of a dollar note.

"The representative can take this. If he gives this to the Communists there will be no difficulty. And it would be the best if Captain Russell is the one."

But Davis shook his head. He could not go under any circumstances, he said; whereas it still seemed possible that Mr. Lin might make the trip.

"I don't think it is possible to persuade him to go," said Maguire in English but in a confidential whisper, as if fearful the other might understand him should he talk louder. "I think it is no use to persuade him."

Mr. Lin tapped Maguire on the shoulder as he spoke; and when he turned, Mr. Lin began speaking into his ear in a more conspiratorial tone than he had yet used.

Davis watched them a moment, then glanced toward the Temple at the sound of soft footsteps. Ching was advancing briskly across the courtyard, carrying a tray of tea cups. He gave one to each of them, then bent close to Davis.

"Mr. Tien come to see you. I tell him wait in the big room. He say no hurry. Okay." And Ching marched away.

Maguire now turned to Davis.

"I will say it briefly. Mr. Lin has a suggestion which is quite good. He says at Changhsing just south of the village called Patu about thirty *li* west of Changhsing City is a small airfield. Early in the war some planes were on the field. Now there is not any, but the field is quite good. He says if a plane came there the Communists will not hurt it. They have orders to keep the field all clear so Allied planes can use it for emergency."

Instead of replying, for he knew the idea was impossible, the Japanese were too close, Davis told Maguire that Mr. Tien was

in the guest room. "He may walk out here any moment. You can't tell," he added.

And even in the darkness Davis could sense Maguire's sudden strain. Maguire turned quickly and whispered in Mr. Lin's ear. The visitor rose abruptly.

"When is Mr. Lin leaving?" Davis asked.

"Tomorrow," said Mr. Lin.

"When Mr. Lin returns he must call on us again."

Mr. Lin bowed, rubbing his hands. In a wide detour they moved along the low wall till they reached the west side of the compound.

"I will see Mr. Lin down to the road," said Maguire.

Davis stared after the two men as they moved quickly down the drive. He noticed that the household watchdogs, Major Kung's two Military Police, eyed them incuriously, but that Mr. Tien's bodyguard looked them over with suspicion, raising his lantern to see who they were. And Davis found himself eying the man malevolently; but as soon as he was aware of it, he laughed, observing with amusement to what depths he had been drawn by the conspiratorial atmosphere those two had created. Of course, it *was* conspiratorial, but what cause was there for alarm? What was Mr. Lin to Mr. Tien's bodyguard other than a subject of idle curiosity? What would he be to Mr. Tien?—just a merchant from across the border. They came and went every day. Mr. Tien was a banker, and like all business men viewed politics as something to avoid whenever possible. He did not have to worry about Mr. Tien. Mr. Tien was harmless.

He had arrived at this conclusion just as he reached the living room door; but seeing Mr. Tien's face through the cloth screen, he involuntarily muttered: "Oh, no, he isn't."

It was a trick of the light, he supposed, but at that moment Mr. Tien's square face had an unscrupulous expression that was curiously unpleasant.

It was just a trick of the light; for as he opened the door, Mr. Tien turned and he could see at once that his face was as it always had been. It was an open face, strong and heavy, a little hard when in repose—something about the wide thin mouth—, but very genial when he smiled.

"Well, well, Captain Russell," said the other, heaving his thick

short frame upright with surprising ease; and he shook hands warmly. As they sat down, Mr. Tien narrowed his small yellow eyes. "You look thin," he said. "Your trip was too tiresome, I suppose. I should have waited till tomorrow, and also you have a guest."

"No, he's gone. A merchant. He's just passing through. I thought he might have some information about our friends the Japanese."

"Where did he come from?"

"Why, he comes from somewhere up near Changhsing," said Davis. "North of there, some little town. I mean that's his native place. But he lives in Shanghai. At least he came here from Shanghai."

Davis screwed himself back in his seat to get farther from the light. He could feel a heat rising in his face, and inwardly ground his teeth. It was all very well to be so inept at impromptu fabrication; it was damned stupid. Even in the case of Mr. Tien.

He liked Mr. Tien. Mr. Tien had been educated in America, had a western point of view and talked freely of people in Wuchuan in a way that was refreshing. He was not devious and mysterious. And Davis appreciated that. In so many Chinese there was a barrier of reserve that stopped any real frankness. But in another sense Mr. Tien *was* mysterious. He managed a private bank, and that was about all Davis knew of his affairs. Davis understood he handled the financial affairs of General Huang Ming-ih, General Chien's superior; and as those affairs concerned the over-border trade, Davis did not ask questions. But because of this air of mystery surrounding Mr. Tien, Mr. Tien's curiosity always made him uneasy.

"But he is going back to Changhsing?" Mr. Tien was asking.

"Changhsing? I don't think so. I suppose he's going back to Shanghai, I didn't ask him." Davis looked puzzled. "Why are you curious?"

Mr. Tien laughed.

"You will think I am a spy, I suppose. And really, I could be a very good spy. In China you can find out anything because we Chinese talk too much, we don't care. That is why I never try to keep any secrets. You see, the best way to keep a secret is not to try to keep a secret. It sounds quite paradoxical, doesn't it?"

But honestly I can tell you it is perfectly true."

"In that case," Davis smiled, "perhaps you really are a spy."

Mr. Tien laughed again, then grew quickly serious. "No, I will tell you why I am curious. It is not a joking matter. You see, up near Changhsing there are quite a lot of these bandits." His eyebrows rose. "These Communists. I think you know the situation. It's very bad. Very bad." He shook his head, making a wry face, but in a moment his expression changed, and his face lit up with a most friendly smile. "Of course, your merchant friend is just a native of Changhsing. That is nothing. My wife was born at a country place near Changhsing and she does not even know what is a Communist."

He chuckled with amusement, then averting his head, eyed Davis pleasantly. "But tell me, how is the trip? Did you stop in Pinghsien? Did you see General Huang?"

"No, I'm sorry to say, I didn't. I was in a hurry to get back."

"You know, really this is important," said Mr. Tien affably. "Just as in your country, I like to be frank. We Chinese are too—too obscure, always hiding things. And of course you can see it right away. We worry too damn much about face, all these things. So I like to tell you, quite frankly, General Huang is disturbed about you. You see, he is the top man in the area, and he knows you are the most important American, and according to his Chinese way of thinking, he feels you should have some close cooperation. Really, he is a capable man, and would like to help you. It is not just polite talk like some of these people."

Davis had drawn in his breath and was about to reply, but the other raised a hand.

"So I say—just let me finish my idea—so I say it is quite important to pay more attention to General Huang. He will help you much more than General Chien." He shook his head contemptuously. "I know General Chien, you see. He's nothing. He has no influence, and his staff is too inefficient, too narrow-minded. They have no education."

Davis had been watching the other carefully as he talked, and in spite of Mr. Tien's easy affability there was something that made him vaguely uneasy, as if there were a second Mr. Tien watching him from behind the yellowish whites of those little eyes.

It was a curious impression. It came perhaps from the feeling that Mr. Tien was more serious about his remarks than his manner indicated. The easy affability, he decided, was just a pose consistent with this social call, which in itself was a pose, and Mr. Tien had come to see him with a purpose, which was this one of persuading him to closer cooperation with General Huang, which was reasonable enough—after all, as the Chinese put it in their personal approach to politics, Mr. Tien was a Huang man—and for that very reason this cautious approach seemed the more curious.

"Yes, I know," said Davis, a contrite expression on his face. "I really must go and see General Huang. It's just that I get so damn busy here." He smiled apologetically. That was true, but only in small part. He knew that General Huang's "closer cooperation" meant closer supervision of his activities. General Huang wanted to control him; so did General Chien, but General Chien was ineffective. And for that very reason he preferred Wuchuan to Pinghsien. "However," he went on, "I'll try to get down to Pinghsien by the end of the month."

"And if you have any small present," said Mr. Tien confidentially, "it would make a good impression. Some cosmetics or something. Something for Mrs. Huang. Something from America."

"Not cosmetics. They can get all that sort of thing from Shanghai."

Mr. Tien shrugged his shoulders. "It's no matter. Just something. I only know everything in Shanghai is too expensive, and it is just cheap stuff, Japanese, I suppose. That is why I always try to get my wife to come into the interior." He laughed forlornly and looked helpless. "But it's no use. She hates to come. She thinks it's just a savage country, just bandits and snakes. More than anything she is afraid of snakes."

Davis smiled. "Snakes," he said. "I never would have thought of that. I should think she would worry more about the human variety—I mean about you and all these pretty little reptilian girls you see in the streets."

Mr. Tien laughed again and held up his hands. "No, no, she knows me too well. Anyway, Wuchuan is quite safe." He smiled slyly. "Pinghsien is much better. If you want a lady friend, I can introduce you in Pinghsien."

"What's the matter with Wuchuan? I met a pretty girl today, a very pretty girl. I may even give her a job. She's a Foochow girl."

"In that case," said Mr. Tien, "I cannot deny it. As a Foochow man I can tell you, Foochow girls are very pretty."

"No, I'm sorry. It's not Foochow, it's *Soochow*."

"Oh." Mr. Tien looked disappointed. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "Well, no matter," he laughed. "Not quite so good, but almost as good."

He glanced at his watch, smiled, and suddenly stood up. "No, no, I must go," he said when Davis protested. He took Davis' hand. "Let me tell you," he said, bending forward with a serious air, "I am joking about girls and so on, but just now I don't want to bring my wife to this place. It's not safe. There are too many strange faces on the street. I don't know what it is, but I feel uneasy." And he drew Davis toward him. "You see, these girls, some times they are spies. You cannot tell. You must be very careful. But if you want to engage this girl you met, I can help you. I can investigate for you to see if she is reliable. It is quite easy."

"Thanks. I'll let you know," said Davis, trying in vain to extricate his hand. It was a custom he always found acutely embarrassing. "I would want her to work here on the staff, so she would have to be very carefully investigated."

Mr. Tien's hand fell away as he stooped to pick up his cane and coat. "What kind of work?" he asked seriously as he moved to the door. "Some personal night work, I suppose." And throwing back his head, he laughed uproariously, slapping his thigh.

Davis accompanied his guest to the gate at the top of the driveway, and bowed him through it. He stood a moment watching the banker and his bodyguard descending the drive, the guard solicitous that the light of the lamp he carried should leave no treacherous shadow before his master's feet, while Mr. Tien, his cane swinging jauntily, strode along behind with an easy air of authority.

Maguire thought Mr. Tien arrogant, "like all the Chinese educated in America," but Davis liked Mr. Tien. Mr. Tien was a little too curious, but that did not mean anything in itself. And yet he could feel no real affection for the man. There was some barrier to affection in Mr. Tien, a hardness, something—he couldn't say what it was.

As he retraced his steps to the porch he met Maguire.

"I'm going now," said the Chinese. Maguire lived in the city. "Could I borrow your flashlight? It is quite dark."

He followed Davis to his office, and Davis followed him back into the court. It was a starry night, pleasantly cool. A murmur still sounded from the city, but it was fainter now and the twinkling lights were growing scarce.

"Did Mr. Lin get away all right?"

"Yes, there is no trouble."

"He wants to establish a liaison between me and the Communists. Blakeslie is just a tool. That's clear enough."

"Of course."

In the distance a dog barked, and in a moment several others took it up. There was a faint sound of shouting far away down the river. For a while neither man spoke, nor made any effort to move.

"Did Mr. Tien say anything?" Maguire asked at last.

"Yes. I was just going to tell you. He wants me to move to Pinghsien. More specifically he wants me to work with General Huang Ming-ih. He wants me to see him right away. He says General Huang is unhappy because I haven't been to see him."

"Did you tell him you will do it?"

"Yes, I said I would see the General as soon as possible."

"It is better to say you will see him but never see him. He just wants to watch you and control you more closely."

"Yes, I know. But why is he suddenly interested just now."

"I don't know," said Maguire. "Mr. Tien is Fukienese; you cannot trust these Fukien people."

Davis smiled. That was no answer at all. But then perhaps there was no answer. And with a murmured goodnight he turned to the Temple. As he put his hand on his office door, he paused suddenly, turning his head toward the city, listening. Far in the distance a shot had sounded, a faint wail in its dying reverberation. Not Nielsen, he thought; too far away. He looked up at the silent stars, wondering. That pilot would be looking at the same stars, wondering. At such a time he could wish he was looking at the stars from Robin Hill where there were no problems, no mystery. There was a fascination in this life, but sometimes too much of a fascination.

Yawning, he moved into the office. He glanced at a small lizard

snapping up insects on the cloth screen of the side window, then at the pile of messages and reports on his desk. Picking them up he locked them in a file and moved on to his bedroom. At least tonight, he thought, there would be no tossing, no worry. He was too sleepy to worry. There would just be sleep.

CHAPTER VI

The Colonel's Duty

THE next morning it was hot again. He could feel the burn of the summer sun as it struck through the window to his bare arm. He had been up since six and was well on his way toward catching up with the business of his post.

As soon as he had opened his eyes, he had seen what to do about Colonel Blakeslie. The girl he had met in Ta Shih-tze, Miss Nina Lee, would make the perfect go-between, if she were willing and if she proved reliable. She had no connection with the staff, she came from Changhsing, and she knew the area.

And so he had shelved the question of the Colonel, pending investigation of Miss Lee, and turned to the main job. The main job, he decided, could best be held up to examination and criticism after a trip, for then he could see it most objectively; weaknesses that were obscure when he was immersed in his work stood out sharp and raw. Thus, along with "catching up," he was in the process of re-examination of his entire enterprise.

It always struck Davis as curious how complicated the enterprise was, how easy it was to lose sight of the forest for the trees, because the job seemed simple, should have been simple and he had always tried to keep it simple.

He had come to Wuchuan five months before with Maguire and Jimmy Wang, his head agent in Shanghai, who went by the code name of Buttercup. As the problem was to collect information about Japanese military affairs and as Shanghai was the principal shopping center in his assigned sphere of activity, he had sent Jimmy Wang to Shanghai. Jimmy and Maguire did a little "over border" business; it helped them and was a cover for their work. The information Jimmy collected was sent back through the lines by courier or by ordinary mail, which was one of the phenomena of the war. Although the letters Jimmy sent were in code, they

were rarely censored. Later a radio and an operator were sent into Shanghai, but the station had never worked very well. Davis now had other agent operations and radio stations behind the lines, similar to Shanghai; and the business was still expanding.

In Wuchuan he and Maguire together performed the same function Jimmy and the other agents performed on the other side of the lines; and considered generally it was a simple function. The raw ore of intelligence was not refined at the Temple. It was merely given a reliability rating and forwarded to Field Headquarters by radio or courier mail. A Navy courier picked up the mail every two weeks. That process was also simple. And with the staff held to a minimum of Maguire, George and Miss Chen, the cook, Ching and the two coolies, the administration of the Temple could not be called complicated.

And yet it was complicated. Everything he did, simple as it might be on paper, became enormously complicated once translated into operation. It was very difficult to send money and supplies into the Japanese areas, and to get supplies from West China. It took endless time and effort to keep up good relations with the local officials, to keep his agents contented, to find and train new agents, to entertain visitors. And such matters, even a small thing like getting alcohol for the jeep, because they took time and trouble, had a way of obscuring and assuming an importance out of proportion to "the main job."

But whenever he returned to the Temple from a trip, he could, as he had observed, be objective. And at the moment his objectivity showed him that he was very weak as to news from Japan. He was getting a good picture of Japanese activities in China, but there were only vague and flimsy rumors of what was happening in Japan.

And so before him on the desk he had spread out and tabulated all his sources of information to see which he might probe with any chance of success. There were his agent radio stations near the Tai Lake, near Kashing, and in Hangchow; there were the Party Intelligence, the Ningpo Guild, the local military, the Ching Hyva Trading Company, the Air Raid Warning Net, the Hangchow-Shanghai Railway Office "in exile," the proprietor of the Happy Congratulation Bath Club, the War Zone Political Office, the

Youth Corps, the Wuchuan Daily News, the Magistrate's Office, Mr. Tien, Mr. Pao the Merchant—all these he labelled as dubious as far as information from Japan was concerned, and dismissed them. On the credit side he had listed Buttercup, his other Shanghai agents, the Customs' people, Mr. Ching (a puppet-pirate who supplied him with maps of Japanese coastal defenses), Mr. Wu the Special Officer, Nanking agents (followed by a question mark as the station was not yet established), and the Japanese themselves. On the last notation, which referred to prisoners, his pencil paused and began to tap impatiently. A few Japanese turned up every month, usually startled little men who had strayed from their encampments to fish or pick flowers. General Chien's Headquarters always bundled them away somewhere, and never gave him a chance to interview them.

General Mao had told him that the Japanese would have an unfavorable reaction to the sight of an American and would have nothing to say. Colonel Chao, his liaison at General Chien's Headquarters, was more frank; the Japanese, he said, might say something bad about China, which would be misleading. It was the same with Japanese propaganda they collected; he was not allowed to see it because it might say something bad about China. But now he was in a position to force their cooperation. He had authority from Chungking. And as soon as he saw Colonel Chao, and he meant to see him that morning, he would force the issue.

He turned his head to regard his arm baking in the sun. A fly was trying to get a foothold in the pale, sun-bleached hair. He hit it with his pencil and it soared away across the room. Following its flight, his eye came on Maguire standing just outside the screen door, Miss Chen behind him.

"Miss Chen wants to see you," said Maguire. "Is it all right?"

"It is always all right," said Davis.

"Miss Chen," explained Maguire, "went to see Miss Lee last night. Miss Chen says that Miss Lee is quite friendly and honest with her. She is a Soochow girl but she does not come here from Soochow. She comes from Changhsing."

He paused, eying Davis significantly.

"Oh," said Davis, raising his eyebrows. "Has she just come from Changhsing?"

"No, it was two months before. She told Miss Chen a long story but it is not necessary to repeat it. Miss Lee's husband's family live in Changhsing. She tried to go to Chungking through this way to join her husband, but some soldiers stole her money. And she does not like to go back to her husband's family because he has another wife in Changhsing and this woman hates her. Also she has no news from her husband. So now she wants to know if we can give her some work to do."

Maguire paused to regard Davis with a look of inquiry that was dark and brooding.

"You want to send her to Changhsing?" he asked suddenly.

"Perhaps," said Davis.

"You do not like the plan of the merchant, what Mr. Lin said, about sending an airplane to Changhsing?"

"No, I don't like it. It's not possible."

Maguire's thin face grew darker still.

"I have to send someone," Davis smiled.

"I think it is foolish," said Maguire.

"Perhaps, but it cannot be helped," said Davis; and he changed the subject. There was no longer any need to draw Maguire into the problem; he could handle Miss Lee himself. "Would you get Colonel Chao on the telephone?" he went on. "I want to see him. About ten o'clock if he's not too busy."

The Headquarters of General Chien Ming-ih were set back from a little square near the South Gate. It was a huge, ancient, rambling building, chopped up into innumerable courts, each with such wide-sweeping roofs that the open sky was all but obliterated. In one of these dark rabbit warrens Davis was ushered into a small office with a large window whose paper panes were all hanging in tatters.

This was Colonel Chao's office, but, as the guard solemnly pointed out, the Colonel was not there. "However, he will come soon—*ta chiu lai*," said the guard. And with the graceful, ceremonious bow peculiar to even the most wretched Chinese, he departed.

Davis accepted the situation as only to be expected, which it was. The Colonel was never in his office. It was always *ta chiu lai*. In time he had grown convinced that as soon as he arrived at the

60

Headquarters the Colonel left his office for the sole purpose of being able to come rushing back to it again ten minutes later with the appearance of being very, very busy. "Very, very busy," Davis murmured aloud and sat down. It was more pathetic than anything else because the Colonel's "busyness" and his impressive title, Director of Foreign Affairs, Fourth Border Defense Area Headquarters, meant very little. But for the Temple there would have been no foreign affairs to direct.

The same guard returned in a moment with a cup of hot tea. "*Ta chiu lai*," he said again.

Sipping the tea, Davis idly examined the room. It contained two chairs and a desk. On the desk was an ink stone, several Chinese brushes and a white porcelain slate on a little wooden stand. The slate was used for notes. Davis noticed it was clean; Colonel Chao had no notes.

Having made this examination, which he had made many times before but always made again in the hope of finding at least some alteration in the room, he returned to his tea. There was no alteration.

He was just taking another sip when there was a commotion in the court, and Colonel Chao burst violently into the room. He was a small man with a large head, a broad vacant smile and an energy of manner that Mr. Tien had once referred to as "all wind and no rain."

"Captain," he said in a high crisp voice, "Please have a *seat*!" The word *seat* came out like a pistol shot.

Davis sat down again while the other busily took off his hat, his Sam Browne belt, and coat. Wiping at his red, perspiring face with a towel, he came quickly to his desk, which he unlocked with careful deliberation. From it he drew an ink stick and a small ink bottle filled with water. He placed these on the table in neat alignment with the porcelain slate.

All this time he had been smiling, as if at some recollected joke. Now, as he at last turned to Davis, satisfied that all preparations for the interview were complete, his smile was broader than ever.

"Captain Russell," the Colonel began. "You are returned."

"I have returned," said Davis.

"Was it well for the trip?" asked the Colonel.

"Yes, I had a good trip."

"That is *good*," said the Colonel. "I am sorry to be late but General Chien has a *staff* meeting. It is too bad for that."

"I know you are very busy," Davis murmured.

"No, no. Not so busy," the Colonel replied happily.

"Well," said Davis, "you may say you are not busy but I know you are. So I will come to the point right away."

"Very good," said the other. "Which is the point?"

"The point is an old problem. The question about interrogation of Japanese prisoners. We have talked about this many times as you remember. You told me that General Chien had no authority to let me question prisoners about Japanese operations; so at last through my headquarters in Chungking, I have obtained permission from your Military Affairs Commission." Davis paused, but the Colonel's smiling countenance remained unchanged. "So what do you think?" he added.

The other snapped erect as if Davis had shouted "Attention!" He turned to his ink stone, and pouring a little water in it began grinding the ink stick with a violent circular motion.

"I will make a note," he said.

And when the ink was ready he drew a few characters on the porcelain slate, which Davis recognized as his own name.

"Now," said the Colonel, "what do you want to ask about?"

"It's about prisoners, Japanese prisoners," Davis said slowly.

"You want to see some prisoners?"

"Yes."

"Why do you want to see the prisoner?"

"To get any information they can give me, particularly about conditions in Japan."

"But now there is no prisoner, you see," said the Colonel. "So you cannot see it."

"I don't mean now. I mean whenever there is a prisoner. I want to see him and talk to him."

"But I do not know when is the prisoner coming, so I cannot tell you about this."

Davis sat forward in his seat. "I'm afraid you don't understand me, Colonel," he said patiently. "If there are some prisoners, *when* there are prisoners, then I want permission to interrogate them,

to talk to them. I have received—”

“Oh, you want to speak with them just some time if they come to this place,” said the Colonel. He sat back, his brow furrowed. “Now, I tell you, Captain,” he said, speaking with slow emphasis and rolling his head from side to side, “it is my *duty* to help you. It is my duty to do it. But this is not so easy. Really, it is impossible, I think, because—” he paused, searching for a phrase—“because we have very *strict* orders, very strict you see.”

He turned back to the desk, and the usual smile appeared again.

“Now, Captain, Captain Russell, there is important news for you,” he began.

“But I have authority from Chungking,” said Davis hastily, and drawing a radio message from his pocket, he placed it on the desk. The Colonel stared at the message a moment swinging one leg back and forth with nervous abandon, then gave it back to Davis.

“I will tell you,” he said. “You must send an official letter to this headquarters so we can keep the file, so there is no mistake. Then I will have a meeting with General Chien and tell you the answer. It is my duty to do it.”

Then as abrupt as ever, he swung round in his chair facing Davis.

“Now I will tell you some news,” he said, a note of triumph in his voice. “Captain, we get a report today by our intelligence agent about—” he hesitated—“about a *pi-lot* who is in an airplane. But the airplane was crashed down in the Tai Lake. Only the *pi-lot* is not killed. His name is Balesly.” Then his brow clouded. He leaned as close to Davis as he could without falling from his chair. “But one *thing* is very bad,” he went on in a whisper. “He is captured by the Communists.”

He paused to let the weight of this calamity sink in, but Davis made no comment. His mind was busy working over the coincidence of the news, probing its portents. At length he shook his head. It could only be coincidence.

“It is very dangerous,” the Colonel concluded. “Perhaps they will kill him.”

“Why?”

For a moment Colonel Chao looked astonished. “Captain,” he lectured, “you do not understand how bad are these people. They

are just bandits. Really, you are too trustworthy. Perhaps he will be killed and they will say it is our guerrillas." His eyes opened very wide, and a look of horror filled them. "It is perfectly true."

"I see," said Davis. "Perhaps I should send someone to get him right away."

The look of horror turned quickly to consternation.

"No, no!" he burst out. "Captain, I will tell you, it is not allowed to do this! It is too dangerous!" With an effort he controlled himself. "It is very *delicate*. You do not understand this kind of problem. It is for us to do. It is our duty to help you and Mr. Balesly. It is our duty to do it."

"What will you do?"

"We already send a notice to General Huang's headquarters. They will tell Chungking to ask the Communists to send this man to Chungking."

"But that may take months. Why can't General Chien arrange something directly? Changhsing is only seventy miles away."

"No, no, it is too difficult. You see, if we send a man, anybody, they will just kill him and say he is a spy. These bandits are too unreasonable, you see. Also General Chien has no authority to decide about it. General Huang must decide about it. It is too difficult. General Chien cannot do this, you see."

What he meant, thought Davis, was rather that General Chien had no intention of doing anything, had no interest in the problem, and would not dream of taking the responsibility. No one would, not even the Communists. He had seen how it would be. There was no point in even discussing the subject.

"So, Captain," Colonel Chao was saying, "you will tell your office it is not *necessary* for you to do something because General Huang will arrange everything."

"I will tell them what you are doing, and I'm sure they will be grateful."

"That is *good*," said the other. "That is very good." And drawing a number of papers from his desk, he spread them out before him. "Now, Captain, here is some information for you about the Japanese troop changes at Hangchow."

And they proceeded with the routine of the day, which as usual Davis found depressing. He always hoped that some really inter-

esting information might slip into the Colonel's hand, but it never did. And the Colonel's reports were not accurate. That oil dump near Nanking on the left side of Blue Mountain—"left side?" What did "left side" mean? North, south, east, west? "Just say the left side," said Colonel Chao.

When the interview came to an end and they started to leave the office, Davis caught the Colonel's arm and pointed to the slate which still bore his name. With an excited exclamation, the Colonel rushed back to rub the slate clean. Davis watched the operation through the window with sombre gravity.

"I must get one of those things," he said as the other joined him.

"Very good," said the Colonel.

"I can see it helps you remember who you are talking to. It must be very helpful."

"Very good," said the Colonel happily.

At the entrance to the headquarters they shook hands.

"I'll send you a letter about the Japanese prisoners," said Davis. "And I hope—"

"Very good," the Colonel interrupted. Davis' mouth was still open, and for an instant he seemed about to continue speaking, but at last his mouth closed, and he shrugged his shoulders.

The Colonel had drawn himself erect. "Captain," he said briskly, "Goodbye." And turning on his heel, he strode back into the building.

It was no use, Davis reflected. Once the Colonel began the ceremony of departure nothing could deflect him from its inexorable course. He smiled wanly, and shook his head.

There had been a time when Davis had been amused by Colonel Chao, but in recent months he had invariably felt dejected upon leaving him. The Colonel epitomized such a hopelessness of ever getting anywhere.

It was hot in the sun, and he clung to the doorways, stepping over the feet of old men dozing in the heat and young women nursing babies and children shouting and pummeling each other. It was unfortunate, he thought, unfortunate that all this vast expanse of human energy should be presided over by people like Colonel Chao. Why did they stand for it?

CHAPTER VII

Under the Camphor Tree

COLONEL CHAO's warning that he do *nothing* to rescue Colonel Blakeslie only served to make it clearer to Davis that he must do *something*. Otherwise, it was clear that the Colonel would be sent on a thousand mile walk to the Communist capital in the north-west, and thence by plane or more walking to Chungking—a painful, two or three months' journey with the summer heat and threat of capture by the Japanese constant companions on the way. But Davis' plan took time, and a week passed before he felt it safe to suggest that plan to Miss Nina Lee. In as far as he was able to pry into her private life, without exposing his interest, she was harmless. There were no rumors, no stories that in any way aroused suspicion.

Through Maguire he arranged to meet her at the Farmhouse. The Farmhouse was a large rambling building, of many courts and wings, in the open countryside to the west of the Temple, only a short distance beyond the village by the bridge. It belonged to Mr. Wu Yin, the Special Officer, Wuchuan's principal civil administrator, a sort of assistant governor for the area, and to Davis a pleasing exception to the rule that all officials were of necessity robbers and cheats. Davis had rented two rooms at the back of this building from Mr. Wu. Miss Chen lived in one, and the other was used as a secret meeting place for his agents and any others whose connection with the Temple he wished to keep dark.

He regretted the necessity of asking Maguire to arrange the interview because he knew Maguire would raise a protest. But Maguire did not protest at once. He made the arrangement without demur, and only when Davis was leaving for the Farmhouse did he question the purpose of the interview.

"You wish to see Miss Lee to ask her to go to Changhsing?" he asked.

They were standing on the porch of the Temple. It was evening and Davis could not see the expression on Maguire's face, for Maguire had his back to the fading light. But he knew well enough what the expression must be.

"Yes," he said doggedly, "that's what I wish."

"Several people know you met Miss Lee in Ta Shih-tze," Maguire went on in an accusing tone. "Mrs. George Huang told George about it. Somebody saw you and told it to Mrs. Huang. So, you see, it is no use to keep a secret about Miss Lee. It is too foolish if you think you can do it. How do you even know you can trust Miss Lee to keep a secret about going to Changhsing? In China the only way to do is not to trust anybody."

"That's too difficult," Davis smiled. "I have to trust somebody. I trust you, don't I?"

"Yes, I hope so. But that is different. You have helped me many times. And I have learned many things from you." Maguire's face was very serious, painfully so. "Really, it is true. So I will never do anything against you."

There was something in the emotion in the man's thin face, and in the tone of his voice which carried an implication beyond his words, as if what he really wished to say was that for all his present loyalty, it was a struggle and the time might come when the struggle would be too much to bear.

But Davis noticed only the emotion, and disliking emotion and compliments, changed his gaze to the dying glow in the western sky.

"Perhaps Miss Lee will refuse to go," he said. "Nothing's definite. I have to take the chance." And anxious to escape, he stepped off the porch. "We'll see," he added in a murmur, and walked quickly to the drive.

Though there was still a glow in the western sky, the moon had risen and already its light challenged the fading sunset so that the land took on a hushed fragile quality. The rich smell of Chinese earth and the fragrance of summer flowers, the lilies in country ponds, had grown faint and delicate, quieted by the early dew. Only in the first bright lights from the city across the river was there nothing subdued.

In the village at the bridge Davis turned into a narrow alleyway that broadened quickly into a country road. And there beyond him lay the wide expanse of the Wuchuan valley, stretching out from the diminishing hills like a silent sea, farms and clumps of trees standing up sharp and clear, black little islands in the ocean of the land. Close by, a faint haze of dark smoke still visible above its roofs, was the sprawling building he called the Farmhouse. As he turned up a narrow path that led to the rear of this building a dog barked dolorously, then moved stiffly away at his continued approach. Near the back of the rear wall he stopped before a narrow door and knocked gently.

"Ah," said a woman's voice.

"Chen *Hsiao-chieh*," he asked in Chinese, "has Lee *Hsiao-chieh* come?"

"Yes, she has come," Miss Chen called.

Then another voice added in English: "I am here."

"Good," he murmured, and moved round the next corner in the building wall to a second door. Unlocking a padlock, he let himself into the dark room beyond. Fumbling in his pocket, he found a match and lit a small kerosene lamp. As he turned up the wick the light brought into view a square room with dingy red walls and a clutter of wicker furniture. The room had a musty, unused smell; and with only two small windows high in one side wall, seemed a fitting place for conspiracy. It seemed the more so to him because he used it for just that. This was the room in which he met his secret agents from over the border.

He had that sense of intrigue now as he put the light on the low table and walked to the door in the back. And this time the feeling had an added element of pleasure. He was enjoying the prospect of seeing Miss Nina Lee for herself; and aware of it, he felt a little ill-at-ease. It was as if his rigidity of purpose, his self-discipline, were being softened, blunted. He wanted to brush the feeling away, as he might brush cobwebs from his face.

He unbolted a door at the back of the room and drew it open. Beyond was a narrow hallway with an empty alcove at one side, and in the far wall a second door. This door now opened and Miss Chen's face appeared in the crack.

"Ah, *Yueh Hsien-sheng*," she murmured, bowing slightly, then

stood aside to let him enter.

Behind her to the side of the single oil lamp, stood the girl he had met in Ta Shih-tze. She eyed him soberly, her pale face shadowed and expressionless, but there was in her manner, in the straight way she held herself, something a little defiant, as if she were afraid of him. She was slighter than he remembered her, or it might have been a trick of the light. The lamp was a little behind her and caught the graceful line of her figure through her thin white cotton dress.

Again as in Ta Shih-tze, he saw her eyes waver and was aware that his stare was too overt. He smiled and said, "Good evening." She gravely inclined her head and returned the greeting in a scarcely audible voice.

"I think we might talk in the other room," he said. "I'll get Miss Chen to bring in some tea."

"Can't we talk here?" she asked quickly, and again he stared.

There was really no advantage in the back room as Miss Chen knew no English, it was merely habit on his part. But the girl's remark irritated him a little. It suggested that he was not to be trusted on personal grounds.

"Whatever you like," he said, sitting down. "It makes no difference."

Miss Chen turned away from them to busy herself with some hot tea. Miss Lee remained motionless a moment, then sank very slowly into a chair opposite him, her back still very straight, her knees tightly together, and her hands demurely on her lap. In her manner there was still that faint suggestion of defiance.

"I hope I don't frighten you," he said.

She inclined her head a little and averted her eyes, as if savoring the remark. "No," she said at last, her voice slow, reflective. "No, I am not frightened." Then a furrow came to her clear forehead. "Why do you ask it?"

"You want to stay here. You don't like the idea of going to the other room."

"Is it a better room?" Her voice was perfectly serious.

"No better. It doesn't matter.

"Anyway," he continued when she made no reply, "you have no reason to be frightened of me." He examined her appraisingly.

"I suppose you're about twenty-three."

"No, I'm twenty-four."

"Then I'm almost old enough to be your father."

She laughed at that, showing small teeth that were very white. He had not seen her laugh before, and the sight brought a sparkle to his eyes.

"What a funny idea," she exclaimed. "You're too polite."

He bent forward a little. "Not too polite. I just want you to feel at ease. I have a job to offer you; it's not easy and it's not very safe. I want you to feel free to consider it objectively. And to do that you will have to trust me. I hope you can."

She made no comment, but her face grew grave again.

"Could you tell me something about yourself?" he went on. "Something about your past life."

"It is not very interesting," she said quietly. "I come from Soochow but I have lived most of my life in Shanghai. My father and mother were killed in the Wing On bombing six years ago, so for two years I lived with my uncle. Then I lived with some other girls because my uncle went to Peiping. Where he is now, I don't know. But before he went away he betrothed me to my husband. It was more like a business arrangement, so someday I will get a divorce." She paused a moment, and her eyes fell to the floor. "May I say I was never a wife to my husband," she went on slowly. "We were married in Shanghai and he wanted me to go to Chungking. But I find out he not only has a wife in Changhsing but also in Chungking. His married life is too geographical. I could see I was just to be his journey concubine, so I ran away and went to stay with his family in Changhsing. But in Changhsing I was also very unhappy because his first wife was there. And she hated me very much. Then he wrote a letter saying please to come to Chungking, and I was not so proud anymore. Also he sent some money. And every day his wife told me, 'It makes me sick to see you.' So finally I ran away again, in order to go to Chungking. But most of my money was robbed before I got here. And then the Japanese captured the Hunan railroad so there was no way through. The only thing I can think is to go back to Shanghai but when I think of that I also feel sick. I hate Shanghai." She raised her hands from her lap. "That is my story. That's all there is."

"If you had enough money, would you still go to Chungking?"

She shook her head, staring at him solemnly. "I do not want to go. I do not wish to see my husband. I hate him."

For the first time there was some emotion in her voice, and in her eyes a faint fire. He found it oddly disconcerting.

"Where did you learn English so well?" he asked, anxious to get away from that emotion. "You seem almost more western than Chinese—at least your way of speaking."

"That is just Shanghai. My father was very westernized. He made me study English all the time, and I went to a foreign school, the Aurora Girls' School."

He nodded vaguely. "Tell me, did you live in Changhsing long?"

"No, only about two months."

"Did you know there were Communists in the area?"

"Oh, yes. They used to come to the city after dark. Not inside the wall but outside. And once when I went to visit the grave of my husband's father, I met some of them. They tried to persuade me to join them."

"Were they fighting the Japanese?"

"I don't think so, but the Japanese always seemed very frightened. They always locked themselves up in the city every night."

"Why don't you think so?"

"Because the Communists said they are more interested in fighting the National Government. First they want to defeat the National Government, then they will drive the Japanese into the sea. They have a slogan, 'Three Mountains One Lake.' They want to capture these places from the National Government."

"What places do they mean?"

"One is Yellow Mountain in Anhwei, one is Nine Dragon Mountain here at Wuchuan. I don't know which is the other. Of course the lake is Tai Lake." She bent forward a little. "Don't you think they will come to this place someday?" She paused, her lips parted, her eyes faintly searching. "I heard them shouting slogans many times. It was very exciting."

Davis smiled vaguely, a faint gleam in his eyes. He was thinking of Mr. Tien's eagerness to have him move to Pinghsien. That eagerness now became clearer; so did the need for caution. Unconsciously, as if to hide any betrayal his expression might give his

thoughts, he lit a cigarette. She took one, too, but handled it so inexpertly he wondered if she had ever smoked before.

"Do you know much about politics?" he asked.

She grew amused, as if at some private recollection. "No, I don't know about politics." Then her brow furrowed slightly. "The soldiers who took my money, can I call them politicians?"

"I should think bandits would be better."

"They were quite clever in tricking me. I can say that."

"Why do you call them politicians?"

She shook her head. "It is nothing. It is something they said." Then she bent forward a little. "Tell me," she said, "you want to give me some work to do, but when will you give it to me?"

He watched her a moment, his own eyes reflective, as if trying to decide what to make of her.

"It is just this," he said at last. "The Communists have rescued an American pilot whose plane crashed in the Tai Lake. They refuse to hand him over to the Government troops, and the Government troops won't send an agent to get him. But if I send a representative with some identification, they will allow this representative to bring him here. And my point in seeing you is to ask if you will be my representative." He paused to observe the effect of his request, but her face was impassive. "The journey is easy enough and it's not difficult to get through the Japanese lines, but all the same you must understand that the mission is dangerous. The Government officials hate the Communists, as you must know. If this trip were discovered, my work would suffer, the Chinese on my staff might suffer and you might be arrested, even shot. So this conversation, the mission, everything to do with it must be kept secret. Only one man knows I am making this request of you and he is just as anxious as I am to keep the mission secret. Miss Chen doesn't know, and you must not tell her. Outwardly, if you agree to go, you will be returning to Changhsing to see your family. I hope you understand why this is important."

"Yes, I understand," she said gravely, then as an after-thought: "Is the pilot a kind man?"

"I have no idea. He will certainly be glad to see you."

She made no comment, and the fear that she might refuse to go began to bother him.

"You want me just to do this one thing?" she asked in a moment, her forehead growing furrowed, as if the suggested mission puzzled rather than disturbed her.

"No, after you return we could use you here at the Temple. We need another hand, and I understand you have had some office experience."

"A little," she said, still looking thoughtful and perplexed. "Tell me," she added, "why is it you just want to send me on this journey? Why not send somebody else and just ask me to do some small things in your office?"

His hope sank further. "You think it is too dangerous? You don't want to do it?"

"Oh, no," she said quickly, then smiled dazzlingly, her teeth gleaming in the lamp light. It was delightful to watch, but that smile bothered him for he had the impression she was amused at the mission, at his questions, at him. "Oh, no. I am very happy to do it. I always like to travel."

"But something amuses you."

She laughed, a gay, breathless, disarming little laugh.

"No, I am just amused because you look so worried and anxious."

He sat back relieved. "Well, I was worried," he confessed. "You see, we have no one we can send who isn't known to be connected with my office. You have no connection with us, you have good reason to go to Changhsing, you know the country. In fact, you are perfect."

"Perfect. Am I perfect?" She was still amused.

"For this job. And now that you have been cleared, we can make a start on it, right away."

"What is *cleared*?"

"I mean we had to investigate you, get you approved. You know, see if there was anything suspicious in your past life."

"And you did not find anything bad about me?"

"Not a thing. Is there anything bad?"

"Of course."

"I mean, disloyalty to China, helping the Japanese. Did you ever work for the Japanese?"

"Oh, yes. I worked for a Japanese doctor. He was very kind to

me. But last year he got very worried about the war, and went back to Japan. He said Japan has too many victories, so Japan will surely be destroyed. And he wants to die in his own country. It was rather pitiful."

"And that's all?"

"Yes."

"That doesn't seem very important."

"In Shanghai nobody cares about the war. They just hope it will be finished soon because there is no business and rice is too dear." She grew sober, her dark eyes shadowed. "The Japanese killed my mother and father," she added in a murmur, then turned her gaze to the floor, with a little shake of her head as if to drive away the recollection. "I hate the war," she said with sudden bitterness. "Why do men always have to kill, kill, kill! It makes me sick."

He thought he saw tears in her eyes, and looked quickly away at the lamp, frowned at the sputtering wick, turned it down a little, and lit another cigarette. Then he rose and turned to Miss Chen.

"Where's the tea?" he asked a little fussily. "I thought we were going to have some tea."

When he walked home that night he was very pleased with himself. The girl was not only attractive, she was intelligent. She had spirit, too. She would do very well. He was certain of that. And she would be very useful to the office when she returned, useful and attractive. She was certainly pretty; amusing, too—that grave manner. And there was something else about her—a delicacy; not just her looks, her gestures, her point of view.

But the fresh coolness in the night air also sobered him; in the summer oil lamps became furnaces. She had talked freely, answered his questions; and yet there was something withdrawn about her, withdrawn and skeptical.

Then he raised his hands. What did it matter? The Chinese regarded most foreigners with skepticism, and he was no exception. She would do the job, and do it very well.

The next afternoon he saw her again and completed arrangements for the journey. She had already bought a bus ticket to Chiangkou, the jumping off place for the walk to the border, and was ready to leave the following morning.

When he said goodbye and wished her luck, she smiled at him with that gleam of amusement he remembered from the night before.

"I hope you don't think I'm being too serious," he said somewhat severely. "This trip is nothing to take lightly."

They were in the Secret Room at the Farmhouse, and though the light from the two high windows was dim he could see that his words disturbed her.

"No," she said softly, "I do not take it lightly. I was not laughing at you. I was laughing at myself. Before I met you, I thought you might be rough and military, and would not be even honest about what you want me to do. But I was surprised. You are somewhat official and reserved, I suppose, but I think really you are just somewhat shy. I can see you are not really military. Are you a university man?"

He nodded without speaking, surprised at the question. Both Mr. Tien and Mr. Wu Yin had put store in his being a university man, as if it were something very special. He could only think they did not know American universities very well.

"I thought so," she went on. "I can tell by your manner, not just your words. You treat me very gently. And it is very surprising. You are worried about me. It never to me happened before. It seems quite strange."

He was not certain he believed this explanation; but all the same her words brought a faint color to his cheeks, and he was glad of the darkness.

"If I was really worried about you, I wouldn't send you on this trip," he said, trying to be jocular.

"No, that's all right," she said with quick earnestness, apparently unaware he was speaking lightly. "I want to do it. I am glad to do it."

When they parted he shook her hand, and the soft feel of it lingered pleasantly in his mind the rest of the afternoon. That it should linger at all made him smile. At his age, he thought, musing over the touch of a woman's hand—Sarah would be amused.

He saw Nina Lee once more before she left Wuchuan. Through a delay in receiving a note, she thought he wanted to see her again and came to the Temple that evening. Nielsen and Paul had pre-

ceded her, bringing with them two gawdy Shanghai girls. A harsh Navy edict forbade any association with the women of the country, and so the Navy had to meet their friends clandestinely. Davis occasionally permitted them to use the Temple, though he had no wish for such diversion himself and disliked exposing the Temple to gossip.

While they were all drinking in the Pavilion, Nina suddenly appeared under the pine tree, white and ghostly in the fading light. Embarrassed at introducing her to such company, Davis would have led her into the Temple; but Nielsen drew her to the Pavilion before he could object. One of the girls was named Cheetah. She made a remark to the other woman, and the other woman called her an obscene name. Cheetah responded with blows. In pulling her away, Nielsen soon found himself locked in a passionate embrace.

Outraged at this behavior, Davis drew Nina away to the driveway.

"I'm very sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have let you stay."

"It is not necessary to be sorry," she replied gravely. "It was not your fault. It was my fault to make a mistake about the note." And to her eyes came that withdrawn smile. "Anyway, don't be embarrassed. It is not necessary to be embarrassed."

"I'll see you down to the road," he said.

Near the bottom of the hill they paused under the camphor tree, which hid them from prying eyes. It was very still and very dark under the camphor tree. There was no moon as yet and the sky was bright with stars, lights shone gayly from across the river, and in the air was a scent of water lilies.

"Better to stop here," he murmured, and for the fourth time said, "I'm sorry. Those women are not—"

"Don't worry. I have seen women like that before. It is not your fault."

"I don't mean that. I mean, it is not good that anyone see you with me. Not now. But I am quite sure they are harmless. You don't have to worry."

"You mean they might be spies for somebody?"

"That's what I mean, but I doubt it."

She laughed softly. "I don't worry about this. It's just you who are worried."

"Well, yes, but don't be too confident. There's nothing clever in being too confident."

"I won't have any trouble," she said. She was quite close, looking up at him; he was only a few inches taller than she, he noticed. It was *her* fragrance, he thought suddenly, the scent of water lilies. He could hear the stir of her breath; it came and went too quickly.

"You can't be too cautious," he said lamely. He took her hand. "The best of luck, Nina. It will be fine when you come back, having you working here. Good luck and—*man-tzo*."

He let her hand go, and stood there awkwardly waiting for her to leave.

"Why do you call me Nina? Is it because you have been drinking?"

"No, no," he smiled. "Shouldn't I call you Nina? Is it impolite?"

"I don't know. Before you always said Miss Lee, each time." She looked up at him, a faint reflection from the city lights in her eyes. "Is it all right to call you Davis?"

He stared at her, a little surprised. "Why, yes, I suppose so . . . if we're alone."

She nodded gravely, and he would have moved away, but she looked up again. "In America everybody likes kissing, I suppose," she said reflectively. "Is everybody very free like your friend? Do you like to kiss girls so freely like your friend?"

He laughed. "Sometimes. Some girls—a girl."

He turned a little. The flower fragrance was stronger, and the stir of her breath more compelling. Then he was aware of her body just touching his, her breasts; it was disturbing. His hands rose about her, and he might have kissed her, but with a little gasp she pressed closer, her lips brushed by his mouth and her hair swept his cheek.

She clung to him a moment, her breathing stormy, then she was gone, standing almost invisible by the trunk of the camphor tree. He stared at her, surprised and a little puzzled.

For a moment neither moved nor spoke; then she bowed slightly, the ceremonious bow of the polite Chinese. "Good night," she whis-

pered, her voice scarcely audible, and slipped away down the path.

He followed a short distance, but she was already swallowed up in the blackness of the night.

"*Man-tzo!*" he called. "Go slowly." But there was no answer.

He stared down into the darkness, puzzled again, then with a shake of the head walked back up the hill, feeling pleased with himself. Cheetah had upset her all right, he thought; but not as he had supposed. It showed him how little he knew of the *sex femina*.

Back at the Temple he turned toward his office, ignoring the party in the Pavilion. But Nielsen called to him.

"Come on, Captain, don't be mad."

"To you, Nielsen, the back of my hand," Davis replied genially, and walked into his office.

Sitting down at his desk, he went methodically to work. Before long the noise in the Pavilion quieted, and he heard steps approaching the Temple, going into it, a woman's laugh. He compressed his lips and frowned, then rose and shut the winter door.

Why the devil didn't they go home, he thought; and locking his work away in the sandalwood file, he sat down to write a letter to his wife.

But he had no sooner picked up his pen, than he fell into a trance. A little later his eyes rose from the paper to study a small lizard snapping up insects on the ceiling. Then, getting to his feet, he emptied an ash tray in the fireplace. Sitting down again he wrote the date at the top of the page and added "Dearest Sarah." But after that he lapsed back into the trance of a moment before.

It was always hard to write letters that didn't infringe on the censorship regulations, and it was worse when he was his own censor. At least, he told himself it was hard.

His head rose again, this time to watch a large blue fly that had begun buzzing noisily around the office. Every night there seemed just one. It was separate from the other insects that flew too close to the little lizard's tongue or played about the oil lamp and in due course incinerated themselves, separate in action and character. It was too clever for that; and being clever, feeding on filth and disease, it seemed something evil.

He was aware of its malevolence now, as like a bat it soared from

desk to window and back again.

In the stillness of the evening its buzzing sounded unusually loud and insistent. And slowly he came to observe that the fly was jeering at him. Why pretend, it seemed to say; it's only difficult to write your wife because you have no real interest in writing her. Why write at all? You are only writing out of habit and a childish respect for agreements made. And you think it will give you absolution for your lack of interest and this soft feeling for Nina Lee. What nonsense!

He put down his pen with a look of exasperation and stared at the blank pages. The dampness of his arm had formed little ridges in the paper. He took a towel from the back of the chair, wiped his arm and gathering up the paper put it in a drawer. He shut the drawer decisively, and began pacing the floor. By the fireplace he paused, and picking up two ancient stone weights with handles chiselled from the same stone, began solemnly raising them up and down at arms' length. He lifted them easily, for though small, he was strong; but it was too hot. Sweat gathered quickly on his forehead and on his chest, and in a moment he put them back on the floor. Straightening, he wiped his face with the towel and walked out to the porch.

The night was very still, even the insect stir. There was no murmur from the city though clear in the distance he could hear the *tap, tap, tap* of the first watch. There was a moon, but clouds were moving across it so that its light was yellow and diffused, the shapes of things, of hills and walls, blurred and indistinguishable from their shadows. The cloud shapes were sharper and caught at his imagination. They had no visible motion, yet seemed moving south at great speed—wild horsemen of the skies, the silent sweeping in of the enemy's first tide, the murdering Mongol hordes.

There was an enormity to the picture that drew him away from himself. In the quiet he could still hear the fly buzzing in his room, but it was no longer important. He felt suddenly, wonderfully free: a strange elation, a sense of lifting up into an air that was perfectly still, perfectly clear and completely separated from the little worries that plagued him by day or dumped him into gloomy introspection by night. In that clarity he could see himself as an harassed little man fussed by threats to his effectiveness as a conven-

tional human being, when it did not matter at all what happened to him and his conventional effectiveness. If the Chinese chose to be obstructive, they chose to be obstructive. If he could not love Sarah deeply, he could not love her deeply. These were forces beyond his control. They did not matter. It only mattered that he follow a decent, honorable course, guided by his ability to choose between right and wrong. And in that, at the moment, he felt an immense strength—nothing dynamic, but quiet, passive, inutterably sure.

CHAPTER VIII

The Irritations of Davis Russell

"OF COURSE," Mr. Wu laughed, his thin face crinkling up, his intelligent eyes behind their rimless spectacles suddenly wise and sparkling. "What else can you expect from an official?" And he gave his cane a flourish that disposed of officials.

Davis watched the cane, amused; it was such a perfect index to the other's character. He handled it gracefully, unobtrusively, with an air of breeding and a nice economy of motion. And that described him very well.

They were standing near the Farmhouse where the paths diverged, one leading to the front of the building, the other to Davis' Secret Room in back. It was early afternoon, though heavy cumulus clouds were sending intermittent shadows hurrying across the land, it was very hot. Davis sweated stickily in spite of an oiled paper umbrella, but Mr. Wu looked cool and comfortable under an enormous gray topee.

"You see," Mr. Wu went on in his precise English, "we have to say *Hsien-fei*, even among ourselves. Even if they do not worry us here, the problem is disconcerting because underneath all our official talk we know their strength is a revolt against conditions for which we are responsible. When I say we, I mean the officials, but I should also say men of means and education. You might say the very existence of the *Hsien-fei*—or shall I say Communists? Yes, Communists. Their very existence is our bad conscience. But there is another point. You see, we understand very well that the war with Japan is over, it is finished. It is just a question of time before you Americans force her to ask for peace. But the Communists are another matter. No one will help us fight them; we must fight them alone. That is very important; you must understand that. We must fight them alone. That is why we are fearful. Even if the Japanese should conquer us, we could still exist, but

the Communists threaten our very existence. They threaten us, the officials—our power, our wealth. And so we are frightened, and our fright makes us brutal and unreasonable. You might think we would try to improve conditions but men do not behave like that. Instead, we try to make our position stronger, we shoot people who talk as I am talking, we grind the people harder to strengthen our armies, and at the same time we try to pretend the Communists do not exist, we try to hide from them—like ostriches. That is why we call them *Hsien-fei*, just 'Border Bandits.' ”

Saying that, a faint smile played across his quiet face, a sad, faintly bitter smile.

“You see, we have our quota of the world’s stupidity. But please don’t think I am a Communist. I think your western collectivist doctrine is stupid; it has been tried before, we have tried it, and it has failed. I am just telling you how things are, and why we try to hide the problem of the *Hsien-fei* from you. We are fearful lest you hear any of their propaganda against us, or give them equipment to fight the Japanese, lest you give them anything, know anything about them at all. You may notice this, and think it foolish, which it is. If you don’t notice it, you may just think it is distaste for the foreigner, or face-saving because our strength is so weak, something of the sort, because no one likes to talk about the *Hsien-fei*.”

To Davis these remarks were like a sudden flash of sunlight on the whole situation in East China. It explained the failure to fight the Japanese—strength must be saved to fight the Communists. It explained away all the unreasonableness of men like General Chien. He had supposed it was their dislike of exposing their corruption and inefficiency that had made them unreasonable; but that explanation had never been completely satisfactory. It was still there, but Mr. Wu’s comments rounded out the picture. He was surprised he had not worked it out himself. He knew the Communist situation, but he had never considered its effect on the officials in relation to himself. That was clear enough now: the desire that he know just what they wanted him to know, that information be doctored, the fear that he probe into their affairs, the effort to control him, his staff, his agents, the desire of Mr. Tien and General Huang that he move to Pinghsien—it was all colored by this un-

82

reasoning fright. It was illuminating and pitiful. But there it was.

He did not tell Mr. Wu these thoughts, but Mr. Wu must have divined something of them, for he said:

"I know you understand only too well. But, believe me, I am ashamed to say such things. The only satisfaction I can get is to show you that some of us see ourselves clearly, are angry at what we see and admit it. I hope you believe that."

And without waiting for a reply, with an abruptness that expressed the bitterness he felt, Mr. Wu turned away toward his own door.

When Davis reached the door to his Secret Room and stooped to unlock it, he glanced northward into the low hills behind the house, as if there he might see the *Hsien-fei* moving along the ridges, smiling down on all this fuss they had created. But across the hills there stole only the shadow of a cloud. He had a real affection for Mr. Wu, and so felt the more sorry for him. He could sense the pain the other must feel speaking as he had, and speaking to a foreigner.

As he turned the key in the lock, an inexplicable instinct made him cast a furtive, side-long glance in the direction of the village.

There he was, he thought. The same man, standing aimlessly in the shadow of a soapberry tree beside the path, staring off at the river. That was the third time; once in Ta Shih-tze, once on the bridge. Someone following him, but to what purpose? It was curious.

He had not intended going into the room, he had simply wanted to unlock the door. He was expecting an agent later that afternoon; and should the man arrive first, he did not want him standing outside the door, inviting the curiosity of passers-by. But now he pushed the door in and slipped through. Placing a chair under one of the small, high windows, he climbed up and peered out.

The man was still standing by the tree, staring off at the river. He watched him for some time, trying to observe if he were armed. But he was too far away. He could only see that the other was small, that he wore a long gray cotton gown and a straw hat.

Stepping down at last, Davis stared uncertainly at the door. It was all too easy to let his imagination run wild, he thought. There were too many rumors. There was the rumor that Jimmy Wang

had been held up en route from Shanghai, and thrown into prison. There was the rumor that the Secret Police, those under General Tai Li with whom the Navy worked, were watching him, that someone in his employ was a Tai Li man. There were rumors and rumors, and but for the mission to Changhsing, he would not have been disturbed. With that mission still in progress, however, still hanging over him like Mr. Wu's "bad conscience," he felt insecure; and in every rumor, or whisper of a rumor, he saw some portent of calamity—Nina discovered, Nina shot, the whole thing a terrible disaster. And Mr. Wu's remarks only increased that sense of insecurity. With hate and fear of the Communists underlying all thought and action in East China, it was all too easy to see spies and assassins in every shadow. Maguire had understood the situation as clearly as Mr. Wu. He wished he had; he wished he had paid more attention to Maguire.

These problems, he thought with some exasperation, might not irritate him quite so much if Major Crampton—or whatever his name was—were not arriving that afternoon. The thought of entertaining a visitor just at this time was annoying. Later perhaps, when Nina and Colonel Blakeslie were safely arrived from Changhsing, but not now. Why Headquarters had to send anyone to inspect him at any time was also a question. The Major could be a catastrophe himself. The place for majors was in Chungking, they should be kept there—chained if necessary.

He wiped his face, peered about the dark musty room, then moved to the door.

Out in the sun he squinted his eyes and moved along the wall to its edge. He paused a moment, then peered cautiously around the corner. There was no one in sight under the soapberry tree. He stepped into the open, a puzzled expression on his face. There were some boatmen on the river bank, and a man working in a field at the back of the village, but the little gray man in the straw hat was gone. Vanished into the village, he supposed. But he also wondered if it might be just the sun, his imagination, some queer subconscious process, overwork.

Then, quite suddenly, he was enjoying the mystery. He opened his umbrella, and reaching the main path, turned right down the river rather than left toward the village and the Temple. He had

no clearly developed plan. But there was no pressing work at the Temple, he had an hour before the interview with the agent at the Farmhouse, and at the moment it seemed unwise to enter that narrow alleyway into the village. On the other hand, if he walked down the river path, he could at least determine if he were really being followed; he might even take the little man in the straw hat by surprise, and force an explanation.

The path wandered past tea and cigarette stalls, where men and women were gathered for a brief respite from the heat. The people watched him soberly but when he smiled at them, they laughed and nodded their heads.

Once he paused to watch a group of naked soldiers bathing in the river. They moved gingerly into the water, all laughing and splashing each other with the exuberance of children. They were like children, he thought; the lost children of China. Their thin, dirty bodies, once solid peasant bodies, already had the mark of disease and death, and if not death by disease then by hunger, or in fighting their own countrymen for the preservation of the officials who brutalized them.

He had not intended walking so far, but before he knew it he had come upon the Wuchuan Pagoda. First there was a field of yellow rape seed flower that gave off a faint sweetness, then a cluster of ancient trees about a sprawling farm; then the land opened and there it was, the White Cloud Pagoda as the Wuchuan people called it, set back from the river on a thicket-covered mound.

It was a graceful structure, very pleasing to the eye; yet there was a sadness in seeing it close at hand. There was too much evidence of decay. Its white stones were crumbling and mossy. The little mulberry tree that grew from its top was sending tentacle roots down through the stones, attacking them like some cancerous growth. He did not like the tree; it spoiled the perfect balance. But it was amusing; if one half-closed one's eyes, as Mr. Wu had observed, the whole thing looked like a piece of celery.

Near the entrance a late wild rose nodded in the faint breeze. He stooped but could not catch its fragrance, then peered back along the empty path, and listened. There were distant voices on the river, and somewhere a woman's voice was calling with a lonely sound. He had not seen the little man again; and now he decided

it was just his nerves, thinking he was being followed, his nerves, the situation. A cloud moved over the sun, and the White Cloud Pagoda was swiftly shadowed. Closing the umbrella, he stepped through the wide doorway into a large octagonal space. It was dark, and he stood still a moment till his eyes grew accustomed to the dim light. The place had an evil smell, and from high above him a thin, insistent squeaking reached his ears.

"Bats," he murmured aloud, and turned to a stone stairway that rose along the wall. There he paused to glance at his watch. There was still time to go to the top. Moving cautiously up the steps, he came to a small landing, felt his way along it and moved up again. There was a startled flurry of wings, and something brushed his head. Then a faint square of light appeared above him, and in a moment he was in a high chamber dimly lit by two narrow slits of windows as in some mediaeval battlement. Near the opposite wall was a narrow stair, little more than a ladder, that led upward to another dim patch of light. The floor planking creaked ominously as he crossed it, the sound stirring up a chorus of startled cries and a great whirring of wings. He tested the wooden steps, and though the wood complained, it held his weight. Moving slowly upward he came to a narrower chamber, where a brilliant shaft of light struck down from an opening in the roof like an avenging sword. There was a damp smell of rotting wood in the still air. The slow drip of water, drop by drop, had a hollow sound, unpleasantly loud.

Another ladder led to the opening in the roof, and he climbed it quickly. Near the top, a step, rotted by the weather, gave way with a rending crash, sending up a little cloud of dust; and for a moment he clung to the side boards. Moving up again, his head soon rose through the opening, and his eyes blinked in the sun. There was a blackbird in the little mulberry tree. It eyed him, startled, chirped once, and with a flutter of wings flew away toward the river. A low wall with a stone seat enclosed the roof on all sides but where the tree had toppled the stones away. Grass grew in the mossy corner about the tree. He sat down carefully on the seat, testing the solidity of the old stones. They seemed firm enough; and he relaxed, wiping the sweat from his hot face.

Though he was wasting an hour, the view was worth it, he

thought. He could follow the wandering of the Hsiao Ho, all the way to the Ta Kiang. To the east the line of trees that had hid the Pagoda now hid the river and the river paths; but he could see the city, and above the city the eastern sky. The clouds that were marching into the southeast were being piled up in an enormous single mass of cloud whose dark yellow base curved south and then westward in a long angry tentacle as if a flanking movement, directed at Wuchuan, were in progress. Already gray curtains of rain hid the mountains, changing the aspect of the land to one of low hills.

There was a familiarity in that view, and he smiled remembering what it was—a vista that opened up along the Connecticut from the bottom of the garden at Robin Hill. He closed his eyes. He could see it very clearly, sitting there, watching a summer thunderstorm approaching down the valley, Sarah coming across the lawn, very pretty and fresh in something white, with a glass of cold beer. "Cold as Greenland," she would say. And then, as now, he would close his eyes and think of himself sitting on top of the White Cloud Pagoda, watching a thunderstorm approaching down the Wuchuan Valley from the Lin Shan in a remote corner of Chekiang Province far off in East China. It would be hard to believe.

A distant rumble of thunder made him open his eyes, and his gaze fell on the slack sail of a junk moving up the river. It hardly moved at all, and, seeing that, he was aware that the breeze had died. The air was as still as in the dark interior of the Pagoda. He stood up; it was time to go back to the Farmhouse. It would rain before long. Then into the stillness came the sound of footsteps scuffling over sandy ground.

His eyes widened, and he moved quickly to the other side of the wall where he could see the path. There was no one on the path. Then he put his head over the wall just in time to catch a glimpse of a gray gown and a straw hat before they disappeared into the doorway below.

His breath came in and he straightened up in a sudden alarm. But the feeling passed as quickly. There was nothing to fear, he told himself; it was just this worry about Changhsing, not knowing what was happening, his wild imagination.

But all the same he moved stealthily to the opening in the roof

and sat down behind it. Then he bent forward, his head on one side. For awhile he could hear nothing; then bending his head lower still, he heard a hollow creaking far below. He waited, listening. In a moment the sound was louder, no longer remote.

He sat back, and wiping the sweat from his right hand, took a firm grip of his umbrella. Davis rarely carried a gun; not so much because a gun was useless protection against an assassin but because carrying one seemed to him ostentatious, melodramatic; it typified a swagger he intensely disliked. But at the moment he wished he had one. An umbrella of bamboo and oiled paper was a poor weapon.

He heard the man's steps on the floor below, quick light steps, then he saw the ladder quiver. The umbrella came back poised. From where he sat he could see the top step of the ladder, but that was all. There was only a slight complaint from the wood; it was impossible to count the man's steps. Then there was a pause. The other had reached the broken step, he supposed.

"What do you want?" he called suddenly. There was no answer and he repeated his question in Chinese.

The ladder began to shake again, then a voice asked, "*Yueh Hsien-sheng?*"

The umbrella came down a little, and his face grew puzzled. It was not a man's voice—a woman's or a boy's.

At that instant the straw hat came slowly through the opening, then the head and shoulders. With a quick movement Davis reached out and removed the hat. The other turned sharply, and had to clutch at the stones to keep from falling.

And for an instant, they stared solemnly at each other. Then Davis smiled, and put down the umbrella. It was only a small, frightened boy.

Seeing him smile, the boy rubbed his shaved head and his round, wide-eyed face blossomed in an enormous grin. He came quickly to the roof, and babbling excitedly began fishing in his long gown, his face twisting into extraordinary contortions with the effort.

The most Davis could make of his talk was that there was a letter and that the letter was to be given to him and no one else, and no one was to see it given.

"Whose letter?" Davis asked, but for awhile the boy made no reply.

Then he straightened up with a look of triumph, and handed over a folded paper. "The letter of Lee *Hsiao-chieh*," he said.

Davis took the paper. It had no heading, nor was it signed. It said simply:

"This is just to tell you, don't worry about anything. I arrived at the destination in just four days. The man I came to see is quite well but has some malaria. So we will wait a few days. Please send the boy back right away, and don't give him any money."

He read the note several times. She had no code, so it could only mean what it said. And what it said did not please him. He felt only the more anxious to get the mission done. It was the return that was dangerous, and he had hoped she might be on her way. She had been gone eight days.

"How is Lee *Hsiao-chieh*?" he asked the boy.

"She is all right."

"How long will it take you to get back?"

"Four days. I will meet her near the border."

"Then you better get going," he said. There were other questions he wanted to ask, but they were unimportant and he could not put them into Chinese.

The boy nodded at once, clapped his hat on his head, let out a whoop that was as startling as it was sudden, and grinning again from ear to ear, disappeared down the ladder.

Two days up, two days back, it would be another four days at least, Davis thought.

He waited till the boy appeared below and scurried away into the near grove of trees, his long gown flapping in the dust so that to Davis he appeared some absurd characterization from a comic play, a dwarf parading as a man of affairs, with no possible relation to the dangerous business in which he was involved.

Davis was in the Secret Room at the Farmhouse. The Chinese opposite him was an agent he was training to send to Nanking, the seat of the Puppet Government and the Japanese high command. The afternoon's instruction had just been completed.

"You had better go first," Davis said to the man. "You have further to go, and it's going to rain in a few minutes. And please remember, I understand perfectly. If you are caught, of course, you will be shot."

The other stood up. "Then I will come tomorrow at the same time," he said. Davis nodded, and the man let himself out the door, closing it with a soft furtiveness.

Davis' eyes fixed on the door with vague irritation. He had at first been irritated because the man wanted more money. Then he had wondered at his irritation; in a country as wretched as China, so savagely lacking in human rights, it was only natural that a man should seize every material advantage he could. That patriots were so few was not cause for wonder, rather that there were any at all. And feeling sympathetic, he had agreed to more money. Now he was irritated because he could see he had opened the door to spoiling the man, losing control, destroying a good agent. In the end these people gained nothing from this soft habit of seeing things from their point of view. They expected toughness, the job demanded it. Of course Nanking was dangerous; what else could the man have supposed?

His eyes sharpened at the sound of heavy breathing on the other side of the door. A gentle knock followed, and a breathless voice said, "Captain Russell!"

"Who's that?" he asked.

"This is Ching," said the voice. "Some American man come," he went on. "Major Crump. He just say Major Crump."

"Tell him to wait," said Davis sharply. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Okay," said Ching.

And more irritated than ever, Davis stood still a moment, listening to Ching's footsteps receding at a trot. It irritated him that Ching should know where he was, that Ching should know about the Farmhouse at all, and even more that he should have supposed that Ching knew nothing about the Farmhouse. Mr. Tien was right; in China there were no secrets. It would not have mattered if these people whose lives he endangered weren't trusting him to protect them. They should see that they were just puppets whom he dangled over a fire.

Opening the door, he glanced at the darkening sky. He would have to hurry.

In the narrow village alley that debouched into the motor road, he cocked his head at a familiar sound, the noisy rumble of a jeep that had lost its muffler. As he reached the road he saw a small crowd in the distance near his driveway and in their midst was a jeep, its trailer piled so high with luggage that he could see nothing of the occupants.

As he drew close there was the sound of an American voice raised in anger, then a sudden commotion and the crowd swayed back in alarm.

"Get the hell away from here! Didn't I tell you to keep away from here?"

A scuffling sound followed, and a Chinese reeled back from the jeep, lost his balance and sank to the ground.

Davis' accumulated irritations surged back, and this time he did not stop to weigh them. Breaking through the crowd, he came face to face with a tall thin man who sat hunched over the wheel of the jeep, staring malevolently at the Chinese, who had picked himself up and was calmly dusting his clothes as if nothing untoward had happened.

"That's not so funny," said Davis, his face very red and set in a queer smile. "Who are you?"

The other regarded him with only mild surprise. "Me?" he said at last. "I'm Corporal—" He paused. "If you want Major Crump, he's up the hill."

"The next time you hit a Chinese in this city," Davis continued slowly, still smiling, but his face redder than ever, "I will turn you over to the police."

The Corporal's mouth opened and for a moment he simply stared.

"Aw, I didn't hit him," he said at last. "I just pushed him out of the way." Then with an air of bitter frustration, "They're just a bunch of animals. They don't know nothing else."

The smile on Davis' face played out, and he gripped the wheel of the jeep. "I don't give a damn who they are," he shouted.

Again the Corporal simply stared, but his eyes soon wavered and with a shrug he slumped down over the wheel. "Okay," he said

at last, his gaze fixed on the road. "Okay. I don't want to start no fight."

Davis stood silent a moment, then turned to the Chinese who had been dusting his clothes.

"*Hao-pu-hao?*" he asked, his voice still shaking with anger. "You all right?"

The man gave his head a quick jerk.

"He doesn't understand," said Davis, pointing to the Corporal. Then he added, "Excuse me."

The Chinese, whose face remained expressionless, gave his head a second jerk.

Moving round the jeep, Davis climbed in. "Go ahead," he muttered, pointing up the drive. "It's going to rain in a moment."

A gusty, fitful wind had sprung up, sending little dust clouds twisting along the road, and rustling the leaves of the trees above them; high above the trees several egrets and a hawk hung almost motionless in the face of the wind. Under the ink black clouds beyond the city was a dirty yellow line of sky that warned of the coming rain. Just then there was a flash of lightning, and thunder crashed and rolled through the sky.

The Corporal made no reply, but adjusting the gears, moved the jeep into the driveway.

As they ascended the hill, Davis' face relaxed and the color ebbed from his cheeks. He felt embarrassed.

"I'm sorry to yell at you like that," he said once.

"That's okay," said the Corporal.

"It's mainly that the situation out here is very tricky," Davis went on, though he knew he had lost his temper because of the other's arrogance; it had nothing to do with the situation. "You've got to be careful. It's no good hitting a Chinese. It's no good anywhere."

"That's okay," the Corporal said again.

As they drew up in front of the Temple, large, slow drops of rain were splashing on the hot flagstones of the courtyard with a faint hissing sound. Ching and one of the coolies were waiting for them, and soon all four were tearing at ropes and hauling bags and boxes to the safety of the Temple.

Then into the bustle, above the wind and the thunder, broke a

deep, strong voice.

"For God's sake, Corporal, tell that stupid fool to take it easy with my suitcase!"

Davis turned. There on the porch stood a tall, heavy-set man, frantically waving a towel in the direction of Ching who was trying to yank a brown suitcase clear of some boxes in the rear of the trailer. Davis turned back to Ching and told him to be careful, then walked over to the porch.

"I'm Russell," he said.

The other turned, and with a distracted smile shook hands. "How are you?" he asked cordially enough, though his eyes kept straying to the progress of the bag from the jeep to the porch. "Glad to meet you. Crump's my name, Ernest Crump. I've heard a lot about you. You're doing a good job, Russell. I want to tell you that right off." And he turned to Ching who was putting the bag down. "Now don't drop it." Then back to Davis with a rueful smile. "They're the greatest people for breaking stuff. They just don't seem to give a damn unless it belongs to them, and then, oh my God, what a howl." He turned again to Ching, who had pushed the bag against the wall to make room for more. "All right, just leave it alone."

Davis stared resentfully. Whose servant did the Major think Ching was, anyway? And he went back to the unloading of the jeep, feeling irritated again.

"I suppose you'd like a bath," he said when the baggage was safe from the rain. "How about some tea first? Or some coffee?"

"No, I'll have tea," said Major Crump, "if it's good China tea, not some damn fool imported Orange Pekoe. It beats me, back in Chungking last month they give us American tea balls. Absolute fact."

Davis smiled vaguely, and led his guests into the living room. A young Chinese in army clothes, whom he took to be an interpreter, was already sitting in the room, combing the dust out of his long hair. He stood up, extended a limp hand, said his name was Lincoln Liang, and sat down again. Davis' gaze grew quizzical. Why, he wondered, hadn't Mr. Liang unloaded his own luggage? And he decided at once that he did not like Lincoln Liang. He looked like one of those soft young men, just out of college, to

whom education had given nothing but a sense of superiority and privilege.

"Nice place," said the Major, looking about him. He mopped his face, and with a sigh peered out at the rain which was now sweeping across the court in wild waves, its noisy tumult drowning out the drone of the radio generator, all sounds, save the dreary rattle of the screen door, a window banging somewhere and the crackling boom of the thunder. Bigness seemed to describe the Major most inclusively, Davis thought; big frame, big voice, an air of bigness. His face was florid and heavy without being fat. His dark red hair, carefully parted, lay neat and flat on his head. It spoke for another quality he had, an air of neatness. He was as dust-stained and travel-worn as the Corporal, but the Corporal looked disheveled and dirty, whereas the Major had kept the impression of being well-groomed.

"Just made it," the Major sighed happily; and lighting a cigarette half-closed his eyes. Then, as a gust of wind swept through the room, "Say. It's cooler already."

Davis sat back, eying his guests dispiritedly. Quite aside from the quarrel with the Corporal, he felt hostile. They were part of his own shop, which made it worse. Why did they have to bother him? This work was too personal; now he would have to watch them like a hawk to be sure they didn't spoil anything. But even as these thoughts moved through his mind, he began to smile; he was like the Chinese officials, resentful of foreign intruders, anyone who might stir things up. No use to fuss; they were here. There was nothing to be done about it.

"By the way," he said, "the shower's in back, and the two front rooms next to this are yours."

"You know," said Major Crump with a chuckle, "if you half-close your eyes, you can see the back of them. You can see your own eyes. You get an inverted image."

Davis stared at the Major with faint surprise. So far the other had not impressed him, but somehow that odd remark was encouraging.

Just then the Major stood up, a thoughtful look on his face. "By the way," he said, "before I forget it, there's something I'd like to see you about."

"Oh, sure," said Davis and led the way to his office.

"It's just this," said Major Crump in a low voice, barely audible above the storm. "You didn't mention it, so I'd like to ask you. Lincoln Liang—if you don't mind, I'd like to put him up here; and if he could eat with us, that would be fine, too. I think he'd feel a little unhappy if we sent him into town. He's not like most Chinese, you know. I mean he's well educated, and he's very clean. He's a high-class type, just out of college."

Davis was nodding his head. "Anything you want. There's plenty of room." He felt amused. He disliked the arrogance of Americans in treating their interpreters as servants, shunting them off to hotels; but in the case of Lincoln Liang he felt that a little arrogance on the Major's part would be quite appropriate.

"Glad you agree," said the Major confidentially. "I know he'd be happier staying here." And to Davis' surprise he shook hands, as if sealing a bargain.

"Say, you've got a nice office," he said, peering about with genuine enthusiasm. He leaned against the door frame and smiled philosophically. "You know, it's quite interesting. Look at the way a man sets himself up, and nine times out of ten, you know what kind of work he's doing. It's a fact."

"My wife's training," Davis smiled, but inwardly he was pleased. Walking to the desk, he picked up an ashtray and emptied it behind the logs in the fireplace. "All nice and smooth on top," he added, "but underneath it's not so pretty."

"Of course," said Major Crump. "Look where you are. You're sitting on dynamite, you know. Hell, the Japs could walk in here any time they want. This is rough country, Russell, really rough." A sly amusement came to his face. "But, of course, if they knew in Chungking the soft life you fellows have out here, they'd be piling out in droves."

"Well, for Heaven's sake, don't tell them," Davis smiled; and again he felt faintly encouraged.

"Oh, there's one thing I should tell you," he added as the other put his hand on the door. "I had a fight with your Corporal down the hill. A Chinese crowd bothered him and he hit one of them."

"They can be damned annoying, those crowds," said the Major. "And, personally, I never take a chance. I won't let them hang

around. Best thing is to shoot off a round or two of your Forty-five. That'll keep 'em away."

"That wasn't what I meant," said Davis doggedly. "This crowd was just curious, and I lost my temper. Not at the crowd, at the Corporal. As long as I'm in charge here I can't allow anyone to stir up that kind of trouble, act like that."

A stolidity that was close to total absence of any expression whatever settled on the Major's face.

"I see what you mean," he said at last, appearing to come out of his trance only after great effort. "Yes, I understand that. You have to be damned careful. Of course, sometimes the best thing is just to lay your cards on the table," he went on obscurely. "Tell them what you want, and then get after it. There's no point in beating around the bush. As often as not you just lose their respect. But look here," he said with a pleasant chuckle, and put a hand on the other's shoulder. "I know you have a lot of problems, and I'm not going to interfere. You're the doctor, Russell. That's what I'm here for. Learn your problems, do what I can to help. And, by the way, if you have any mail, the Corporal's going back in the morning."

At that point Ching appeared on the porch. "Tea ready," he announced, holding up a hand against the driving gusts of rain.

Once, while stirring his tea, Davis looked up to find the interpreter staring at him with an unctious smile on his smooth features.

"Do you like China?" he asked as their eyes met.

"Yes, I like China," said Davis. "Do you like China?"

"Some is very good, and some is very bad," said Lincoln Liang in a bland voice. "Our Generalissimo is very sorrowful, you see, because there are too many naughty people. Too many people are too ignorant. They are too bad for this. So we students of the New China must sacrifice our blood to give a good example to the common people so they will be more patriotic. Our government is too sorry because the good friends from America have too many hardships because of the naughty people."

To Davis these remarks were so sickening, so incredibly ridiculous, that he could only stare open-mouthed. In the end he returned to his tea without replying.

"I hear you speak Chinese, but it is not correctly," Lincoln Liang

continued in a moment. "I will be glad to be your teacher. You will be happy for this, I think."

"Do you speak Chinese?"

Lincoln Liang laughed. "Of course. It is my native tongue. Not only can I teach you, but I can tell you many interesting things about China."

The Major nodded agreement. "He knows what he's talking about, Russell."

"So what?" said the Corporal; and Davis laughed. But if either Lincoln or the Major resented his laughter, they did not show it.

When tea was finished, he showed the Major to his room, and at once the latter sprayed it with a small aerosol "bomb." He then busily set up his own mosquito netting, spread sheets on the heavy quilt that served as a mattress and poured insect powder along the edges.

Davis watched this forehanded procedure with sober curiosity.

"We have very few mosquitoes up here on the hill," he said at last.

"Never take a chance with malaria, my boy," said the Major.

"And no bedbugs," Davis went on.

"Never take a chance," the Major repeated. "And always fix your own bed. Then you're safe."

"I see," said Davis; and having showed the Major the way to the shower, retired to his office. The rain had quieted and the thunder was receding across the valley; through the window he could see a streak of sunlight on distant hills. But the sight did not cheer him up. He was perfectly clear on Lincoln Liang, he thought; and the Corporal was not important, he was leaving in the morning. But he was not sure about the Major. He seemed decent enough, but a little heavy and not too intelligent; and yet there were moments when he had come to life—that business about half-closing his eyes. That was a curious thing to say. And yet it was irritating to have to clutch at straws—he had problems enough.

CHAPTER IX

Dinner for Major Crump

"THIS man is too proud," he said abruptly. "Even Ching is angry about him. He always tells Ching, bring this, bring that, some tea, some eggs, anything."

Maguire's voice trailed off into a little complaining sound, full of exasperation. Lowering himself into a chair by Davis' desk, he crossed his legs, and rustled the papers in his left hand. In the other he held a cigarette; in the hot lifeless air the smoke rose smoothly through his fingers to form two even columns that reached close to the ceiling.

Davis stared. "You don't mean the Major?"

"No, no. He is quite polite. This stupid fellow—Lincoln Liang."

Davis relaxed and his good humor returned. It was early morning. Maguire had dropped into the office with the usual collection of military information from his sources in the city. The Corporal had just departed, and the Major was busy in his room.

"Oh, well," he shrugged, "they'll only be here a few days. It's too bad but—*meiyu fatze!*" He spread out his hands, then abruptly raised a finger. "Anyway, here's one piece of good news." And he took a note from the desk and gave it to the Chinese.

"Is it from Miss Lee?"

Davis nodded and narrated the incident of the day before.

"But," said Maguire, "you see, the only thing is, the most dangerous part didn't happen yet."

"Yes, I know," said Davis. "And it's the same in Jimmy's case—it's not over yet. It's not a rumor, I hear. He really is in gaol."

The other was nodding his head. "Yes, but Mr. Yu at Party Headquarters promise me to get him out. He is a friend to the Wang family, you see, also to Jimmy. He already sent somebody to Sanpo."

"I know that," said Davis. "But if the border troops are going

to stop our agents, put them in gaol, make them pay a fine—and this is the third time—, if it's calculated, if it's political, not just robbery, then it's serious and we ought to do more than complain. The next time, whoever it is may simply disappear."

"I think this time it's just robbery because Sanpo is famous for being like this. The soldiers are the most rotten of any place on the border. I know one time a merchant was robbed by those soldiers, and when he complained to the Magistrate's office he was put in gaol, and for no reason was accused to be a Communist, so he was shot. You see, the Magistrate's office also gets some squeeze. They are just as rotten." And Maguire shook his head with disgust.

"What's that?" a genial voice broke in. "What's rotten? What's this all about?"

And the Major rolled into the room.

Maguire rose at once, and with a slight bow started for the door.

"Come back after lunch," Davis called after him. "There's one more problem. Your Nanking friend."

The Major was very energetic that morning. "Well," he said. "Now give me the whole picture, show me your plant, tell me your problems. And when you get my prescriptions, then you'll really be in trouble." He laughed heartily, drew out a small notebook full of neat notations and a gold-plated pen, and, having composed himself comfortably, waited for the lecture to begin.

It took the whole morning. Davis explained the local situation, the unhealthy character of Wuchuan, the uneasiness of the officials. He diagrammed his intelligence collection system: the agent radios over the border; the courier agents who came in with long dispatches, with maps, and Japanese periodicals; the local sources of information, from the Military and the Kuomintang Secret Police down to Mr. Pao, the merchant who traveled back and forth between Wuchuan and Hangchow. He omitted one operation, however; he said nothing about the mission to Changhsing.

In this process of explanation he came to see that the Major would not be very difficult to handle. He seemed to have very few opinions that weren't standardized equipment. His mind, being purely mechanical, was at the mercy of the last person he talked to. It would not be hard, thought Davis, to send him away with a good impression of the Wuchuan post.

Davis showed him the Temple, the storeroom, the radio house.

In the radio house his face clouded. "What's that girl doing here?" he wanted to know. "What about your security? That looks bad, Russell."

But when Davis pointed out that Miss Chen knew no English, only the alphabet, that the codes were constantly changed, and that she never knew the key, just the routine deciphering, he nodded approval.

"Good," said the Major. "That's very good. That's first-rate."

Davis showed him their situation maps and their files: enemy troop movements, fortifications, airfields, shipping, railroad activity, storage dumps, oil production—

"That's important," said the Major with a confidential air. "Oil production. That's very important."

In the afternoon Davis took him to see Colonel Chao, and the visit pointed up another side of the Major's character, a facility for collecting misinformation. Though the Colonel had never been out of China, the Major came away convinced he had.

"Where did you learn to speak English so well?" he asked as they rose to go. "Have you been to the States?"

"Where?" Colonel Chao asked uneasily. The other's heavy manner disturbed him.

"To the States," said the Major, raising his voice but making no effort to speak distinctly. "Did you go to school there? Did you get a degree?"

"Oh, yes," the other exclaimed. "But, you see, my English is not so good."

"Better than my Chinese," the Major chuckled, and Colonel Chao burst into a scream of nervous laughter.

"Where did you go?" his tormentor went on. "There are a lot of Chinese at Chicago, also up at Madison. You didn't go to Madison by any chance? It's quite a beautiful place."

"Oh, yes!" said the Colonel wildly.

"Oh, so that's it. An old Wisconsin man! Well, well, well!" And slapping the Colonel on the back, the Major broke into song. "*On Wisconsin, on Wisconsin!*" he sang lustily, punctuating the words with heavy chuckles. "That's it, eh?"

"Major," said the other, moving to the door in alarm. "I am
100

happy to see you. Please to come to see me any time."

One afternoon several days later the Major came into Davis' office looking thoughtful. "While you were down at the Farmhouse," he said, "I had a talk with your friend Tien. And I agree with him. I think you'd do well to move to Pinghsien."

Davis began drumming his pencil on the desk. He might have foreseen that Mr. Tien would have an easy time with the Major. The Major's opinion was more than agreement; it was a quotation.

It was the Major's last day. There was to be a farewell banquet that night; by mid-morning the next day he would be gone. At the moment he was "sold" on the Wuchuan post. The problem was to keep him that way, to see that he went back to Chungking saying, "Don't worry about Russell. We see eye to eye on everything; he's doing a good job."

And so Davis slowly, painstakingly attacked Mr. Tien's theory, pointing out that Mr. Tien was General Huang's man in Wuchuan; and that it was to domesticate him, to clip his wings, that General Huang desired him to move to Pinghsien. Quite aside from that danger, Pinghsien for all its size, did not have the raw material of intelligence that Wuchuan had.

"Of course," he added, slowly wiping his bare arms so that the sweat gathered in little rivers ahead of the towel, "if the Japanese or the Communists descend upon us, I've got to pull out. But that's all arranged. I have a house in Pinghsien all ready—it belongs to the Catholic Mission. Father Fogarty will let me have it any time I want it. But it's silly to move if it's unnecessary."

"I agree with you," said Crump vaguely, slowly nodding his head, as if he had something quite different in mind. "I just wanted to be sure no one was pulling the wool over your eyes. Headquarters will want to know that, you see." He smiled suddenly, a genial friendly smile. "But don't worry. You're doing a fine job, Russell. I mean that."

He had grown serious saying this, his manner very sincere; and now he walked over to Davis and shook hands. He had done that before, and Davis disliked having to play a part in the gesture;

it seemed affected.

"By the way," Major Crump went on, offhandedly, sitting down and staring at the window. "I wanted to ask you—this is something else—about exchange. I understand, they told me about it down at Field Headquarters." His mouth opened in a loose way and he glanced inquiringly at Davis, but the Captain's face showed no expression. "I mean, I understand you can send U.S. currency into Shanghai, exchange it into puppet money and then into C.N. at the border and make a hundred percent profit. Well, the point was—" he laughed cheerfully—"I brought out about a thousand U.S., and I thought you and I might make some sort of deal. After all poor old Crump isn't getting any younger, and he's losing a lot of insurance business back in Chicago. And you can take it from me, I'm on your side, Russell. I can ring a lot of bells for you back in Chungking."

Davis had drawn in his breath. He tilted back in his chair, gripping the edge of the desk, as if part of him were fighting to keep hold of that solid piece of furniture while another part struggled to tear him loose.

"I'm sorry, Major," he said, an almost childlike embarrassment on his face, "I'm sorry. I can't do that. I don't play the exchange. The money's for the work, and even there I don't like to do it; if the Japs catch you with American money, you can be shot."

"I see," said the Major, his face growing blank. "But," he added, a little gruffly, "you still send it in now and then, for special purposes. A little more wouldn't hurt."

Davis opened his mouth, then closed it and shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said again. "I can't do that." And to his mind came a similar incident, years before at school during an examination, a boy behind him wanting to see his paper. He had felt the same embarrassment, said the same thing, "I'm sorry. I can't do that." The boy had never liked him again. Nor, he supposed, would the Major.

A color had also come into the Major's countenance. "I could ring a lot of bells for you in Chungking," he said doggedly, a harshness in his voice.

Davis clenched his teeth. To be asked to be dishonest was embarrassing, but to be offered a bribe infuriated him. And his anger was the stronger because he hated to be classed with people who be-

102

lieved in "getting ahead" for the sake of "getting ahead." He had no interest in "getting ahead," had never had any interest. He wanted to do well what he had to do, then his ambitions trailed off into a curiosity about the world, books, conversation, doing things with his hands. Suddenly he hated the heavy man opposite him, hated his appearance, his heavy voice, his manner, everything about him.

"I don't like that kind of bell," he said sharply, his eyes hot.

The Major's face grew redder, he made a growling noise in his throat; then quite suddenly, his manner changed. He seemed to be struggling to keep control of himself. At last he stood up and walked to the front window, his back to Davis.

When he spoke his voice was calm, almost genial. "I see your point," he said. "Forget it. It was just an idea."

Davis made no reply. "He won't forget," he thought.

The other turned sharply and peered at the door. "Oh, Lincoln," he said cheerfully. "Come on in."

And Lincoln Liang, pushing back his long hair, came quickly into the room. Looking behind him and then out the windows, he moved to the desk with a pleased, furtive expression.

"I just find some very good information," he whispered. "It is very secret."

"Yes, what is it?" the Major asked, coming close.

"I find some very good news. There is a Colonel of the Fourteenth Air Force crashed down near a place called Changhsing where there are some Communist bandits."

The Major's eyebrows rose, his ears, everything about him seemed to rise. "A Colonel, you say? What's his name, do you know?"

"Balesley."

"Blakeslie," Davis corrected, suddenly nervous. "Thanks, Lincoln, but we know about that," he added. There was nothing to do but bluff it out.

"You know it?" asked Lincoln with obvious chagrin, and a look of disappointment spread across his face. But the disappointment did not last long. "Also I am translating some secret Japanese news," he continued briskly. "You will be very glad to see it. I just finish it in a minute."

And he hurried from the room.

"Colonel Blakeslie," the Major was muttering. Then a light dawned. "Say, that's the Group Commander the Fourteenth was so excited about."

Davis nodded slowly. "He's up near Changhsing about seventy miles north of us. He's been there for about two months. The question is how to get him out. As Lincoln says, he's with the Reds." Davis raised a hand in a gesture of helplessness. "That's the trouble. Whenever you run into something to do with the Reds, there's always trouble. It would be less of a problem if the Japs had him."

"And he's all right? They haven't tortured him, have they?" The Major was strangely excited.

"No, no. That wouldn't make sense. The trouble is they won't negotiate with the Government people, and the Government people won't negotiate with them. If it weren't for that there would be no problem. You could walk up there in three days, and never come near a Jap."

The Major stared hard at Davis. "Why didn't you say something about it?" he asked, a censorious suspicion overclouding his excitement. "What's the game? What are you up to?"

Davis smiled. He now felt completely at ease; there was a sense of inevitability about the moment that was almost amusing. No bells would ring for him in Chungking. He shrugged his shoulders.

"It's only a side issue, nothing to do with the main job. I didn't think about it." He felt no qualms in lying to the Major; it was almost a pleasure. "It's not that I haven't done anything. I have. Blakeslie may show up any day now."

"What have you done?" asked the Major, still suspicious.

"I sent an agent up there to get him."

"What kind of an agent?"

"A young woman."

"A woman!" the other burst out. "That's a damn fool thing to do!"

"She's not just a woman. And for God's sake don't tell Lincoln or anybody. She comes from Changhsing. She knows the area, and she knows the roads, and more important she knows what to do. She hasn't had any trouble so far. I had a note from her four days ago. She'll manage somehow."

"Yes, but how in hell can you be absolutely sure she's straight?"

"I can't, of course. Out here you can't be absolutely sure of anything."

"That's just it," said the other. "You can't be sure." His strange excitement was mounting again. "I know this Red business is dangerous, but we've got to do something. We can't leave Blakeslie in the hands of some Chinese woman, who might stab him in the back. We can't do that. It's criminal."

He began pacing the floor, muttering to himself.

"By God," he said at last, turning abruptly and putting his large hands squarely on the desk. "By God, I'll do it."

"Do what?"

The other did not at once reply. Instead, he rushed to the door and called for Lincoln Liang. Lincoln's voice answered distantly.

"Do?" he said, turning back to Davis, his heavy face purposeful, his eyes shining. "I'll get him myself." His voice rose excitedly. "Look, Russell, it's time someone showed these people, these damn Communists, all of them, that we're out here to win a war. And if any of your friends here try and stop me, I'll damn well tell them." He paused to gather breath. "I'll tell them, anyway. I'll tell them tonight at your dinner."

Davis had nothing to say, but his face was agitated. The Major's scheme was too wild, too ridiculous to answer seriously. It would do no good; in all probability Nina and the Colonel were already over the border. It would only stir up the hostility of the Chinese. And yet it was clear that the Major was perfectly serious and that he meant to do exactly as he said; this was too good a chance to win glory, medals. And suddenly Davis felt resigned, that sense of the inevitable. "Why stop him?" he thought. "Let him make a fool of himself. It won't hurt Nina, it might even help her . . . draw away attention. It might help the post in the same way, draw away attention, absorb some of the hostility."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I think it's silly," he said aloud. "They're almost surely over the border by this time. But it's your funeral. Only please keep the girl secret."

"My funeral," said the Major darkly. "Not yours, anyway. Mine and maybe the Colonel's, but not yours, anyway."

"Oh, no, Major," said Davis, irritation apparent in his voice.

"Let's be reasonable. I think my plan is best, you think yours is. Let it go at that."

And to his surprise, the Major stopped his pacing, burst into a heavy chuckle and for the second time that afternoon extended a hand. "All right, Russell. We'll let it go at that. I'll call off my dogs."

"Where the devil's that boy," he added impatiently, turning to the door. "Liang! Hey, Lincoln, come on in here."

And in another moment Lincoln came running.

"I get the other information," he said, waving a handful of papers. "It is quite useful for you, I think."

"Never mind that now," said the Major. "We've got something more important." He took a stand before the Chinese. "Lincoln, I'm taking a short trip to the border, maybe behind the lines; and I want you to come with me. We take off tomorrow morning."

Lincoln looked startled.

"I'm going to Changhsing to get Colonel Blakeslie. If he's on his way here, and he may be, we can at least see that he gets proper treatment and protection. Of course, there may be some risk." He smiled, and his smile had only contempt for danger. "It'll be rough, Lincoln, but hell, it's rough all over."

By this time, Lincoln had recovered sufficiently to sense the mood of the moment.

"It is my duty to help you, Major Crump," he said bravely. "Even if it is too dangerous, I will do it."

As there had been no storm that afternoon, the evening was hot, and the wine made it hotter. It was a *Hsiao-hsing* wine, and very good. There was none of the oily or rancid taste one found in the usual, cheaper yellow wines. But it was also stronger, and served hot, it had a heady fragrance that in itself started the sweat rolling.

Mr. Tan, the Manager of the Farmers' Bank, had just conveyed the good wishes of the second table to the first table, to the guest of honor, Major Crump, and had invited them all to drink. It was then discovered that Colonel Ho had tea in his wine cup. Mr. Tan expressed himself as astonished to find a Hunan "pepper-eater" with such lady-like tastes. Colonel Ho complained that having put all his money in a Mr. Tan's bank, his nerves were so on edge that

he could not stand strong wine. This verbal exchange had set all the wits at the first table going, and like a sudden sweep of fire the resulting hilarity had engulfed not only the first table but the second table as well.

Davis, who sat at the bottom of the second table, the place decreed for the host by etiquette, was able for the first time to view the feast with some detachment. At the moment he was pleased with everything; the tables, with their red and white cloths, set out in the court under the pine tree, the white-coated servants from the "Get-Quickly-Rich" Restaurant moving among them, the steaming food, the colored lanterns strung from the Temple to the Pavilion, though with the sun still above the horizon they would never be needed; and he was pleased at the hilarity of his guests. It showed that the wine had taken hold, and they were enjoying themselves. It was curious the way a Chinese feast developed. It started slowly, soberly, dish following dish, drink following drink; then a little gayety that would subside as its infection failed to catch; but in a moment it would break out again, then sometimes as tonight, as if only the heat of one more match were needed to start the fire, it would burst into full flame and engulf the entire party.

It was curious to see General Chien laugh. His eyes almost disappeared, dark irregular teeth showed prominently in his heavy face, and his red swollen neck seemed ready to burst his collar. General Mao, Chief of Staff of the Garrison troops, who was lolling back carelessly in his chair was evidently the principal wit, for his rapid comments brought gales of laughter. He had a strange face. It was very smooth with sharp, large features; something like that of an American Indian. It was a sinister face, Davis thought; and just now as he lolled back spitting out epithets between wide thin lips carved in a fixed grimace, he had a ruthless look that made him more sinister than ever. Exactly the opposite was the expression of the man next to him, Mr. Eoyang, the local magistrate, whose round red countenance and large misty glasses, presented about as warm and jovial an appearance as one could ask for.

At the moment Mr. Eoyang looked fussed, because Major Crump, apparently thinking the Magistrate the cause of the hilarity, was chanting in his ear: "Drink it, General old boy!"

Davis' pleasure in the scene increased, noticing this byplay. It

seemed so symbolic of official America trying to deal with official China.

The merriment subsided a little as Colonel Ho, accepting defeat, drank off a cup of wine, and Mr. Tan returned victorious to the second table.

"Captain," said Colonel Chao, swinging round to Davis, and thrusting out his wine cup so violently that half the contents spilled on the table cloth. "Now, you must drink because our table is won the victory. Now, Captain!"

Davis raised his cup, then lowered it again. "Oh, no, Colonel. Fill yours too."

Someone filled the Colonel's glass.

A small man beyond the Colonel, a divisional political officer, said something in his ear, and the Colonel screamed with delighted laughter.

"*Hao, hao!*" he cried. "Very good. I will challenge you to play the finger game. Captain, you will play the finger game."

Davis bowed obediently. "But just once," he insisted.

The Colonel drew back his sleeve and at the appointed signal thrust out two fingers shouting, "*Wu-chin-kuei-ah!*"—a doggeral expression meaning "Five." At the same time Davis also thrust out two fingers. "*Ssu-keh, ssu-keh!*" he said, "Four, four." The Colonel drew back his hand for another throw; then seeing that Davis had already won, having guessed the sum of both hands, he fairly hurled the wine at his mouth, most of it going down the front of his jacket.

"All right!" he cried. "All right. One more. I challenge you, Captain!"

"Try Major Crump," said Lincoln Liang, when Davis refused. "He is very good for playing this game."

Colonel Chao, who was still standing, swung half round. "Major," he shouted. "You challenge me to play the finger game!"

The Major looked over his shoulder. "Why certainly, certainly, certainly."

Taking his chair and his cup, the Colonel seated himself beside the Major. "The Major is very good," said Lincoln Liang to Davis. "He can defeat you easily, so Colonel Chao will get too drunk."

But Lincoln's belief in his superior was shortlived. In a matter

of a few minutes, the Major had drunk six cups and the Colonel only one. Red-faced, the Major withdrew. He had lost his joviality and eyed the Colonel with a truculent air.

"That's not the way to play it, of course," he mumbled thickly. "You ought to count three and throw out your hand. It throws me off, you know."

But the Colonel did not hear him. Flushed with victory, he had accepted General Mao's challenge; and General Mao, in a careless arrogant manner, one arm over the back of his chair, forced the Colonel to drink four cups without losing a game. In the rising laughter that accompanied this slaughter, the Major's disgruntled complaints were swallowed up and lost.

With the arrival of rice the drinking came to an end, as was customary; and a few minutes later the whole company arose and wandered to the Pavilion where tea and fruit were laid on the stone table. By this time the noise and excitement that had distinguished the closing moments of the feast had subsided into a general buzz of animated conversation while Americans and Chinese alike stretched their cramped limbs, washed their mouths with warm water and spat it over the wall, lit cigarettes and sipped the hot steaming tea.

Major Crump, as if determined to score some sort of victory over Colonel Chao, had pinned him against the courtyard wall, and was lecturing him belligerently. On the Colonel's face was a bland, fixed smile. Both swayed unsteadily but made no effort to sit down.

"Listen to me, Colonel," the Major was saying, his face a few inches from the other's. "I want to tell you, in America when we say we're going to do something, we damn well mean what we say. We do it. See what I mean? Everything above board. Everything frank and sincere."

"Frank and sincere," said the Colonel. His smile vanished and he became elaborately serious. "It is what I say to Captain Russell. Always frank and sincere is the way to do. It is my *duty* to do it."

"Never mind what you tell Captain Russell," said the Major menacingly, tapping the other on the chest with a forefinger. "You listen to me, Colonel. I want to tell you, and I want you to tell General Chien. Is that clear? You tell General Chien."

"I will tell it," said the Colonel. "I am happy to tell it."

At this point the Major swayed back a little, and seeing the smiling face of Mr. Eoyang, who was waiting patiently to say goodbye, his scowl vanished and he broke into hearty laughter. Slapping the little man on the back, he vigorously pumped his extended hand.

"Well, how's the little general?" He wagged a reproving finger in the smiling face. "Never got you to drink that drink, you rascal, but I'll get you next time!"

Others now came up to say goodbye to the guest of honor and the Colonel managed to escape to the Pavilion for another cup of tea.

In the meantime Davis was busy bowing the departing guests down the driveway. General Chien shook hands cordially and bowed so low it seemed he would topple forward on his face. General Mao, however, remaining perfunctory and withdrawn, hardly so much as inclined his head.

"The old General seemed pretty friendly tonight," he told Maguire as they returned to the Pavilion. But Maguire shook his head. "It is because he drinks some wine, but anyway he is more polite than General Mao. Everybody hates General Mao."

There were still a number of people gathered about the Pavilion, including Mr. Tien, who seized Davis' hand and shook it warmly.

"Well, Captain," said Mr. Tien. "It was a very good dinner. Really, I admire you because you always know the correct customs. You make everybody comfortable. You give them a good impression. And so does Major Crump. He's very interesting, very interesting."

Davis glanced apprehensively over the other's shoulder at the Major who had once more cornered Colonel Chao, this time in the back of the Pavilion. The Major was obviously drunk.

"Let me tell you again," the Major was saying, swaying back on his heels to keep the other's face in focus. The Colonel's mouth hung open and his countenance bore no expression whatsoever, a fact that indicated he was genuinely interested. "I have orders, Colonel, to get Blakeslie, and bring him back. You've been in the army long enough to know what an order is, Colonel. In the army an order is an order. Right? You know damn well, an order's an order."

The Colonel shifted uneasily.

"Major," he said with his usual emphasis, though his voice had dropped to a whisper. "It is nothing to worry you. We make all the arrangements. Only this case, you see, it is very—" he floundered for a word—, "it is too *delicate*, you see. So we must be very careful to do this."

"That's why I'm here," the Major broke in. "I want to tell you and I want you to tell General Chien, your plan is not quick enough. It's inefficient."

"Major, we will do it," the Colonel insisted, "even it is too difficult to do it. Now we arrange to tell these people to send Mr. Blakeslie to Chungking."

The Major drew himself up to a commanding height. "That's enough, Colonel. Understand? Let's have no more of that. I am going to Changhsing tomorrow." He spoke very slowly, enunciating each syllable with separate emphasis. "I—am—going—to—Changhsing—Changhsing—tomorrow—tomorrow morning."

At last the Colonel seemed to understand for an expression of alarm leapt to his red face.

"No! No!" he said abruptly, his whisper rising shrilly, his head swinging back and forth adding emphasis to his words. "It is not necessary, Major, and it is too danger for you! It is too danger! And, frankly, I tell you, Major,"—Colonel Chao's voice had grown agonized—"I tell you, it is not possible!"

"We will see," said Major Crump thickly, swaying back and forth in an increasing arc. "We will see. And I want you to tell General Chien, wire his outposts, give me every cooperation."

"No, I tell you," the Colonel insisted, "it is not possible for you to do it." A new thought came to him, and he bent forward eagerly. "You can ask Captain Russell. He knows the situation very well."

And he drew back a little, smiling, confident he had struck a winning blow. But if he had, the Major was not aware of it.

"Don't be so sure about Captain Russell," the Major was saying in an elaborately secretive manner. "Don't be too sure, Colonel. I can tell you as a fact, absolute fact, he doesn't like your game any more than I do. If he did why did he send this woman up to Changhsing? What did he do that for? Eh? What did he do that for?" And delighted with himself, his animosity vanished in a shout of laughter. "What for, eh? You old goat, Colonel, don't get

so excited. I'm not going to make love to the Communists. You needn't worry about old Crump." And putting a heavy arm about the Colonel's shoulder, he broke into song. "*On Wisconsin! On Wisconsin! On into the fray. . .*"

Davis, who had been listening surreptitiously to the argument at the back of the Pavilion, had cringed at the word "woman." For a moment he stood motionless. Then conscious that something had to be done, he excused himself and strolled around the table to the back of the Pavilion.

"Did I hear you mention my name?" he asked as lightly as he could.

The Major reared back to focus his eyes on the intruder, and the Colonel seized his arm. "I told to Major Crump," he said excitedly, "that it is not possible to go to Changhsing. And I told to him you agree about this because you understand the situation."

Davis shrugged his shoulders. He felt relieved. Apparently, the Colonel had not understood. The Major was regarding him blankly; leaning unsteadily on the stone table.

"The trouble is, Colonel, if he has orders to bring Colonel Blakeslie back, he has to do what he can. It may be foolish, but—" He spread out his hands, helplessly.

"Right," said Major Crump, jerking his head forward so abruptly that he nearly lost his balance.

"But it is not possible, I think," said the Colonel weakly.

Davis shrugged his shoulders again. "Perhaps not. But who really knows? Anyway, I'm sure Major Crump won't cause you any trouble."

At this Major Crump burst into another boisterous laugh. "Right, Colonel," he cried. "Don't worry about Crump. Keep your chin up, old boy. Old Sailor Crump—never die!"

And with another noisy laugh, he clapped the Colonel on the back lost his balance and sat down heavily on the stone seat, his face suddenly vacant. Then his head began to sag, but in a moment he let out a chuckle and jerked erect to point a finger at Nielsen, who was watching from the courtyard wall.

"Hey, Nielsen, in my room, back of the desk, there's a bottle—a real bottle. See what I mean?"

"Absolutely," said Nielsen, and started toward the Temple.

The rest of the guests were beginning to leave. Colonel Chao made no further mention of the Major's proposed journey but to Davis, when he said goodbye, he whispered, "The Major is quite drunk, I think."

"Quite drunk," Davis agreed, and was more certain than ever that the Colonel had not understood the Major's remark about sending a woman to Changhsing. But he was just as certain Mr. Tien had, and that was just as bad.

When he came back to the Pavilion it was deserted. The Major, Lincoln Liang and Paul had joined Nielsen in the Major's room, and a noise of singing now burst from that quarter.

"There's a troopship that's leaving Bombay
Bound for Blighty shore . . ."

He sat down, lit a cigarette and surveyed the scene. Lights were beginning to twinkle across the river. Chinese voices and the clash of dishes came from the kitchen quarter at the back of the Temple. A light he could not see glared on the back wall of the compound. Shadows of men came and went on the wall, now enormous and grotesque, now shrunk to normal size. The air was very still, scented with the smell of pine.

". . . bound for the land they adore!"

The camphor tree beyond the drive was jet black against the fading yellow sky. Night was coming fast. As with nature, so it seemed with his work. A twilight hung above it, the good day was done. It was curious, his prophetic sense of hostility when the Major arrived, because there had been no real reason to feel that.

A soft wind stirred suddenly in the pine tree, brushing its branches into a faint murmur.

"Oh, hell," he said aloud, and rising, walked slowly toward the Temple.

"Bless 'em all, bless 'em all, bless 'em all,
The long and the short and the tall.
There'll be no promotion this side of the ocean,
So cheer up my lads, bless 'em all. . . ."

CHAPTER X

The Mist at Wuchuan

CHING brought him a cup of coffee, and he took it out to the stone wall overlooking the river, and sat down in the sun. The dew was gone and the stones were growing warm. In another two hours they would be too hot to touch. He glanced at his watch—it was almost six—, then out at the river. The sun had not yet reached the water, and it was half-hidden by a mist that crept up the far back into the city, so that Wuchuan seemed an unearthly place, a fanciful city, something from a book.

But at the moment he did not see the beauty in the mist, for it symbolized an obscurantism, a frustrating cloudiness that seemed to be sliding over his work. It was just two weeks since Nina had gone away, two days since Crump had left. And Crump had telephoned the night before to say that there was no word of Colonel Blakeslie, and that he was proceeding to the border. In due course, thought Davis, he would have to send someone to find the Major. The complexity of the problem seemed to be growing, the threads of control fraying off into obscurity. It was all too easy to imagine Nina in gaol—Crump's remark, Tien hearing it, passing it on to General Huang; it was easy enough. Crump himself might have trouble. The officials were very excited; and in time the Temple would suffer. He had thought he might disassociate himself from Crump; but he had seen General Chien the day before, and it was clear the General did not believe him when he disclaimed any responsibility for Crump's journey. The General simply thought him clever. He should have restrained Crump at all cost, not given in so resignedly. It was hard to see how he could have been so resigned.

Of course, there was one solace—Buttercup. But in a way it was not a solace. He had looked forward to seeing Jimmy Wang. Jimmy was such a pleasantly undisturbed little man. His cheerful, easy

going common sense was always a relief after the gloomy nervousness of Maguire. It would have been easier for his own peace of mind to have kept Jimmy in Wuchuan and sent Maguire to Shanghai; but then he supposed the strain of Shanghai would have been too much for Maguire. It made no impression on Jimmy; Jimmy had no nerves.

Jimmy's return, however, had not been the solace hoped for. Jimmy was convinced he had been held in Sanpo by orders, not from General Chien, but from General Huang in Pinghsien. He had been questioned about his activities, the Communists, his "loyalty." But he thought there was nothing to be done about it.

"Don't complain," he said. "They want you to complain. They will say, 'Give us a list of your agents, and we will send instructions to the border troops not to stop them.' It is a good way to find out all your agents. Then General Huang can control them, and you will be just a puppet. The only way is just to try all the time to keep the agents secret as possible. If you have some trouble, it cannot be helped. Just do the best you can."

He supposed Jimmy was right. He had never found a time when Jimmy was wrong. But that meant a new struggle, a constant, undeclared war to keep his agents free of the clutches of the local military. And so to the problem of Nina and Colonel Blakeslie, to the problem of Major Crump, he now had to add this problem of freedom for his agents. And then, of course, there was the basic problem, the problem that created all the other problems, the increasing official fear of the Communists. The bitter thing was that all these problems were a side issue; their solution would not better his work, it would simply make it easier to get on with that work.

Thinking of his work, he rose at last and retreated to his desk. He remembered an evening several weeks before—the night Nina had said goodbye under the camphor tree—he remembered feeling detached, free of his worries, feeling it only mattered that he live as close as possible to the dictates of his conscience. In this pleasant early summer morning it should be possible to recapture that feeling, he thought.

He glanced out the side window at the sun shining through the trees, glinting on the tiles of the radio house. Should be possible,

yes—he could understand the feeling, it was perfectly reasonable, but though his mind could say, “That’s the real thing”; he still could not blot out this gnawing feeling of frustration, this sense of a dissolution he was powerless to stop.

Midway through the morning Buttercup came into the office to discuss the situation in Shanghai. Squeezing his round little body into the armchair beside Davis’ desk, he smiled benignly.

“Before I tell you about Shanghai,” he said, “I just want to say, I think about Miss Lee, and I don’t think your idea is necessary. I mean, when she comes back, you don’t have to send her away. Just keep her here. She will be safe enough. Maybe some people will look at her suspiciously. But she is not a Communist, so after awhile everything is all right.”

“Perhaps,” said Davis, “if she ever gets back at all.”

Buttercup laughed, a high squealing laugh. “It is no use to worry. What can you do? You and Maguire worry too damn much. What can you do?”

Davis smiled slowly. “All right. I agree. What about Shanghai?”

Buttercup laughed again. “If you and Maguire were in Shanghai, your nerves will kill you. But really the situation is quite good. One small thing—don’t use the Hua Chung Company for sending money, use Ta Chen. You give Hua Chung ten thousand here, in Shanghai they give me nine thousand. They say remittance fee. I say just highway squeeze. But the most important thing, it’s damn urgent—about the radio.”

“Yes, I was going to ask about that. Why can’t Shih keep it going.”

“Well, I tell you, Shih is no good. Chavez found it out. You remember—this Chinese-Portuguese fellow? Shih is working with the Puppets, you see. He takes money with both hands. He sold them most of the radio equipment so when something went wrong he has no way to fix it, no spare parts, not anything. But now Shih is nervous; it is too delicate because if he suspects anything, he will go to the Japanese for protection and just say everything.”

“You don’t think I can bring him back here.”

“It’s too dangerous. If you tell him, he will just be suspicious.”

“What do you suggest?”

“There is only one way to do. Too many danger to too many peo-

ple any other way, but he is your man so I told Chavez to wait till I get your permission."

Buttercup was not smiling but his cherubic face had lost none of its cheerful innocence. "No," he went on, "it is the only way. I try to think of something else, but it is no use. I don't like killing; it's always damn dangerous. In China you can rob people every day, and nobody cares; but if you kill somebody, then people get excited."

"I'd get excited myself."

Buttercup laughed. "Yes, I know. But in this case not to do anything is more dangerous. Shih knows too much."

Davis considered. The room, Buttercup,—everything seemed suddenly cold and hard. "Who will do it?" he asked. "Chavez?" He was not meant for this sort of thing. If it had to be done, if lives were in danger, why hadn't they done it? Why did he have to take the blame?

". . . he is quite tough," Buttercup was saying. "He does not care about anything." He paused. "Then I can tell him?"

Davis took another breath. "Yes, you can tell him." And though his face was set, for a moment something close to panic flickered in his eyes. "If you find there is no other way."

Just then Miss Chen's voice called out from the Telephone room at the other end of the Temple. Someone was "striking electric words," she called.

"It is for you," said Buttercup, getting to his feet. "Telephone for you, Captain."

When he reached the room and raised the instrument, only a confused buzzing greeted him. Then several voices broke into the clear, speaking rapidly in Chinese, which he understood only when they said "Huei! Huei!" which was the Chinese equivalent of "Hello." Very faintly a third voice had joined in. He put the receiver down and churned the bell crank. Lifting the receiver he heard someone saying "Captain Russell," and he was startled because it sounded like Nina. Then the buzzing drowned the voice; in a moment it stopped abruptly, and a new voice, very loud, burst into his ear, as if someone were shouting at him from only a few inches away. Then the buzzing returned. He said "*Huei*" again several times, but there was no answer. At last the operator broke

in. "Later, later," the operator said. "The line is cut."

It was like his work, he thought; confused, ineffectual, fatal to those he employed, one of them, anyway, perhaps another. Of course, "Later, later," things would clear, whatever *later* meant.

He felt desperately sleepy—a noonday feast at the Farmer's bank, too much wine, the hot enervating day. But he hated to sleep in the afternoon; he always awoke feeling drugged, a taste in his mouth. And yet, in refusing to surrender, the sleepiness persisted through the afternoon, vitiating his work by sending him off into dreamy moments of half-sleep. Once, when his head bowed on his chest, he saw Mr. Shih talking to him; Mr. Shih was calm enough at first but in a moment he was shrieking, struggling in the arms of two dark shadowy figures. He drew out of the scene with a shudder, and there was Ching.

Ching wanted to know if he was ready for a cup of tea. He said not just a cup, a pot of tea.

But as soon as Ching had gone his head nodded again, and he drifted off into a peculiar world that he had not experienced since childhood. He had been an only child, and had at times felt that nothing was as it seemed, that all people were actors, everything a play in which the object was to keep him from knowing reality. He had that feeling now. He could see himself talking to someone unseen, talking earnestly, then wildly. "Why is there all this friction and confusion and deception?" he shouted in despair. "Why do you make me lie and cheat? Why must I kill a man? Why are you all against me?" He fused with his own image. "I want order," he demanded emotionally. "Order and clarity and decency and trust . . . I don't want to be alone." There was a man with yellow hair and a blue Chinese gown standing beyond him. "Do you hear? I've been alone too long."

He jerked erect, aware that he had spoken aloud. There, beyond the window, stood a yellow-haired foreigner in a Chinese gown. For a moment he simply stared. A Catholic priest from Pinghsien perhaps; not Father Fogarty but a new man, out on the country circuit.

He rose, then grew aware of gay laughter and babbling voices, full of excitement. A moment later the door burst open, and into

the room came a dusty little figure dressed in brown shorts, much too tight, with a blue shirt tucked in. A dusty, dirty little figure, beneath whose wildly disordered hair bright black eyes regarded him with a gay smile.

"Captain Russell, we come back," the figure cried. "You see, I told you it is very easy."

For awhile Davis stood motionless, unable to grasp the full significance of the situation.

"Well," he said at last, smiling slowly, "look what the cat brought in." He shook his head to drive away the sluggishness he felt. "Why didn't you let us know?"

"I tried to telephone but the wire is no good. This morning I tried."

"Yes, I know," he said. "I mean I thought it was you. Did you meet Major Crump?"

"Meet what?—who? I just met Colonel Blakeslie. You want to see the Colonel?" And turning to the window, the other shouted, "Blakeslie!"

A moment later the man in the blue gown entered the room.

"The next time you rescue me from that goddam place," he said in a slow drawl, as if they had been talking for some time, "send a girl with a little more respect."

"You swear too much," said the girl.

"You see," smiled Colonel Blakeslie.

He had very pale blue eyes and his dusty face a careless good humor that was attractive. He was very young, Davis thought, certainly not out of his twenties. It was curious perhaps, but he had never thought of Colonel Blakeslie as a personality before; just a problem, a case.

"Anyway," the Colonel was saying, "it was a real incentive to have something like that walking ahead of me. Did you ever see a better line to follow," and with a whistle he ran a hand down the girl's side and over one hip before she jumped away with a squeal. "Prettiest thing in China."

Davis could only stare incredulously from one to the other, his thin cheeks wreathed in smiles. So overpowering was his feeling of relief that he could think of nothing to say. All his other problems seemed to dissolve along with this one. He felt free and un-

worried once again. Dusty and dirty as she was, he wanted to scoop Nina into his arms and hold her there.

In spite of spending two months with the Communists the Colonel seemed to know almost nothing about them. He neither liked them nor disliked them; he was indifferent. He thought them very little different from other troops he had seen in China, a little better fed perhaps but no more interested in fighting the Japanese. "Why that Commander," he said, "Commander Wu, he told me that first they had to kick out the National Government and then they would kick out the Japs. I asked him how long it would take, and he said five years. So I said, how about giving me leave of absence till 1949. And he said he would consider it. How about that!"

The incident seemed to amuse him very much.

"If you want to find out about the Communists, see Nina," he added. "All I know is, if you stick a finger in one, he'll start making a speech."

It was the second evening since their arrival and Davis had seen very little of Nina. He had told her that she might live in the Secret Room at the Farmhouse, and she had been busy settling into it.

"Why don't you go and see her tonight?" the Colonel continued. "She'd love it."

"I think I will."

"She'd love it," the Colonel repeated significantly.

Davis ignored the statement. "By the way," he said, "I sent a messenger to find Crump. As soon as he gets back you two can take the jeep, if you don't mind waiting a few days."

The Colonel laughed. "Don't give it a thought." He was in fact perfectly content to wait several weeks. He was fond of collecting souvenirs and Wuchuan had a great variety, mostly worthless, but the Colonel's tastes were not exacting. He was also fond of girls, and having met Nielsen, life was for the moment complete.

"You know, Davis," he mused, "you ought to relax. Why don't you just sit back and relax. I'll tell you what you need. You need a woman."

"I have one—back in Connecticut."

"Nina's closer."

Davis smiled and stood up. They were sitting on the wall overlooking the river. "Thanks," he said. "I'll tell her. I'm going to see her right now."

"You know," the Colonel went on, ignoring Davis' attempt to get away. "Up in Mashan we stayed in a hotel. I couldn't sleep that night. So I called on Nina, just busted in. Couldn't help it. She was taking a bath. You never saw anything so pink and firm, and just lovely. It was terrible."

"Yes?" said Davis, suddenly irritated.

"That's all," the Colonel laughed. "She threw me out and locked the door. It was terrible."

"Glad to hear it," said Davis; and turning, he walked across the court and down the drive. He felt irritated at his own irritation. If the Colonel wished to be indiscreet, he could be indiscreet, Nina, too. It wasn't his business.

It had rained as usual and the evening was cool, though it was mid-July and the Small Heat at its height. He walked briskly, flashing a light on the path ahead. Stray dogs growled, blinked in its beam, then moved aside to bark uneasily at this foreign figure, this foreign smell. Little lights glowed in the village, dark figures moved about, there was a smell of cooking, a sound of subdued voices and the tinkle of a solitary bell. Beyond the village the Farmhouse loomed vaguely from the dark, a black indistinct mass. Out of that mass two small orange lights glared at him from the high windows of the Secret Room, like the eyes of some gigantic beast of prey, crouched, ready to spring—"Tiger, tiger, burning bright . . ."

The land reached him with the rich earthy smell that was so peculiar to China, and with it the cloying sweetness of incense sticks burning on the soft night air.

At the back of the Farmhouse he knocked softly.

"May I come in?" he asked.

"Who is it?" someone answered—Nina's voice. Then in the same breath, "Oh, Captain Russell—one minute."

The door opened at last and Nina smiled out at him. She was dressed in a white robe over a silk night gown, and wore little red

slippers. Her dark hair was screwed up tight with a hundred pins, and her sunburnt face had the natural radiance that only a bath can give.

"Your hair," he said, "very pretty."

She put a hand to her head with a little exclamation, laughed and ended in a frown. "I'm sorry. I look too ugly," she lamented.

"Very pretty," said Davis.

"Stop it," said a voice beyond the door. "Stop making love."

He moved into the room; and there were Buttercup, George and Miss Chen, sitting before a low table on which stood two bottles of wine and several cups.

George was about to leave, but seeing Davis, held back. He was red-faced and noisy, having been to a feast. "Oh, Captain Russell," he fairly shouted. "I have some information for you." George was a little jealous of Maguire and Buttercup; and when in his cups was eager to show that he could be a "detective," too. "I heard very confidentially perhaps someday the Communists come to Wu-chuan."

Davis glanced at Nina and Buttercup; their faces wore only a faint smile.

"I think you will like to know it," George added uncertainly, a little disappointed that Davis showed no interest.

Buttercup laughed. "You must not say that word so loud. If Mr. Hsiung can hear you, he will get excited."

"I don't care about it," said George aggressively. "You just like these people too much. *Chi-lai, chi-lai*, Mr. Jimmy Wang," he added in a sing-song, alluding to a ballad popular among the Communist guerrillas.

"No, no, I just say in Shanghai the Communists agents are more clever than the Chungking agents. But I don't like the Communists; I don't like to be Russian in Chinese clothes or Chinese in Russian clothes, whichever. I just like to be Chinese."

"Mr. Marx wasn't a Russian," said Davis. He had no wish to object to Buttercup's remarks, but felt that he should show George that he was as much George's friend as anyone else's.

"Yes," said George, "you just talk words."

"No, no," laughed Buttercup. "I just think Communism is not so good for anybody. They want to rule China just like the Kuo-

mintang. Maybe just now they are better. But later maybe it is worse. They want too much government. Do I want the Government to say, here is your rice bowl, Mr. Wang. No, I want to say, Mr. Government, here is your rice bowl, and don't eat too damn much or I will kick you out."

He laughed gaily; and George unable to think of a suitable reply moved unwillingly to the door. But at the door, he turned. "Just be careful about Jimmy," he told Davis. "He is too smooth and business-like."

"I'll watch him," said Davis, and George vanished into the night.

"Well, Jimmy," said Davis, sitting down. "Well, Jimmy, what about this?" And he waved his hand at the girls and the bottle of wine.

"No excuse. Just guilty," said Buttercup. "These girls are no good. They only take one centimeter of one glass."

Davis filled a cup and raised it to Miss Chen. "*Kanpei*," he said. The girl giggled and shook her head, so he swept his glass in a circle to include the entire company. "*Kanpei*. Come on, Nina."

Nina was regarding him with a side-long stare that was both coquettish and amused. Suddenly, she picked up her cup. "I will drink to Jimmy Wang, to a good journey back to Shanghai." And she drank off the wine.

"None for me?"

She smiled sweetly, and picked up Miss Chen's cup. "Very well. Here is to Captain Russell, best wishes that he will treat the women on his staff very nicely." And she drank that as well.

There was a moment of silence, and Davis glanced from Nina to Buttercup and back again with sudden suspicion.

"Why was George talking about the Communists?" he asked.

"It is nothing," said Buttercup. "I was just talking about Shanghai."

Davis switched his eyes to Nina. "Does he know anything about your trip?"

"No, no," she said lightly. "He just thinks I met the Colonel on the journey, and that the Colonel persuaded you to give me a job."

Davis nodded slowly. "I wish everybody thought that. Did Maguire—did Mr. Hsiung tell you about the possibility it's known

I sent you to Changhsing?"

She laughed, a gay, soft little laugh. "Yes, he told me but it does not make me nervous at all. Why should it? It does not mean I am a Communist. Perhaps some people will watch me. But after a while they will get tired of doing it, they will just look at me and not think anything."

He nodded slowly, wondering if that were her idea or Buttercup's. Buttercup had said the same thing. "Have you told Jimmy about your journey?"

"No, I didn't tell anybody. Do you want to hear about it?"

He said he did, and she turned to Miss Chen who was staring placidly at nothing. "Excuse me," she said in Chinese. "They want me to give them some information about meeting Mr. Blakeslie."

It was a long story. She had first gone to Siaofeng, where she had arranged to accompany a merchant on to Changhsing. They had proceeded together to a place called Meiki, near the border. There was talk of bandits, but they crossed the border in a rainstorm without meeting a living soul. When they drew near Changhsing she left the merchant, to visit a friend in a small village close to the Communist area.

"So I sent this small boy," she went on, waving a hand at the door to the hallway at the back of the room.

"What small boy?" Davis interrupted.

"Don't you remember?" She turned in her chair and called: "*Hsiao Lao-pan!*" A moment later a sleepy voice grunted, "Eh?" and a tousled little figure wearing a blue apron came into the room, the same small figure Davis had met on the top of the Pagoda. "I just call him Hsiao Lao-pan, 'Small Manager,' because he was the chief president of a peanut box, for selling peanuts. Now he will be a servant for Miss Chen and me. He is only thirteen, so it's all right to live here, I think."

"All right for you," said Buttercup indelicately, "but how about Hsiao Lao-pan?"

"You are too silly," she cried, sinking back in her chair in sudden confusion, her hands on her cheeks to hide the color growing there. "He is just a boy."

And that was all he was. Without his straw hat and gray gown he looked more of a boy than ever. Seeing Davis, his eyes lit up,

he bobbed his head as awkwardly as he had on top of the Pagoda and smiled the same enormous, silly smile. Then, conscious that all eyes were upon him, he stared at the wall, opened his mouth in a prodigious yawn, and turning slowly about, waddled back to his narrow retreat between the two rooms.

"So I sent Hsiao Lao-pan to see the Communists," Nina continued. "And that night he came back and took me to a small house where I met some men with guns. They talked for several hours, and asked me many questions, and studied the letter you gave me. Then they told me not to leave till they came back. After that they went away.

"There was just an old man in that house, and even if I said something to him he never said a word. It was quite dark, but I could see he watched me all the time. So I couldn't sleep. It was quite terrible. Outside there was a wind, and I was afraid." She had grown excited, her eyes wide and bright; and Davis could see she really had been afraid. "At last I made Hsiao Lao-pan wake up, but he just fell asleep again. Then about four o'clock those men came back, and they told us to follow them. But the old man never moved. So one of those people said, 'Don't pay attention. He is dead.' But they did not say why he was dead or anything. Maybe they killed him, I don't know. It was the worst thing."

After that they had walked for more than an hour; and though several times they saw men with guns, no one paid them any attention. At length they came to a village and she was taken before an officer who sat at a large desk. He was dressed in the same uniform as the others, but his speech and manners showed him to be much better educated.

This officer asked her many questions, and all the time she grew sleepier and sleepier. He asked her about Captain Russell and if he would be willing to cooperate with the Communists, but she could only say she did not know.

At last he gave her some food and let her sleep for two hours. Then he told her that Colonel Blakeslie had malaria, but in a few days he would be all right. Then she and Colonel Blakeslie would be escorted to a place called Mashan, where there were some Government troops called the Loyal Patriotic Army.

Then he gave her some information and some maps to give

Captain Russell. "I have them sewed up inside my dress," she said. "I will bring everything tomorrow and explain it to you."

Four days later on the afternoon of their departure she finally met the Colonel. He whistled when he saw her, which showed how pleased he was to be rescued, Nina explained. Then they set out for Mashan with a dozen soldiers. Near the border they met Hsiao Lao-pan. They walked all night through a silent, mountainous country. It was very dark and the soldiers would not let the Colonel smoke a cigarette, which made him curse very much. Sometimes the soldiers would make everyone stop and listen; then they went on again very quickly. There were Japanese patrols nearby, they said.

"It was very strange," said Nina. "All those men walking, but sometimes you could not hear anything."

Close to dawn they stopped on the side of a mountain, and the soldiers told them as soon as it was light they could go on another five li, and that would bring them to Mashan. Then without a sound the men vanished.

In an hour the sky grew light and in another hour they reached Mashan. The soldiers at Mashan were very surprised to see them and were very suspicious at first because they thought Colonel Blakeslie might be a Russian. But once he showed them his credentials they became very polite. She told them that she and Hsiao Lao-pan were traveling from Changhsing, and the Communists had stopped them and told them to take Colonel Blakeslie to Mashan. They asked her many questions but did not interfere or even seem suspicious.

From there on they had no difficulty whatsoever. "And that," said Nina, spreading out her small hands, "is the end."

There was a grace, Davis thought, in her every gesture, every movement.

"It is very good," said Buttercup.

"What about the evening in Mashan?" Davis asked.

"We had a big feast. But first we slept half the day."

Davis had opened his mouth, but now he closed it again. It would only embarrass her, he thought.

"Why do you ask about Mashan?" She was eying him with vague curiosity.

"No reason," he said, studying his wine glass. "How was Colonel Blakeslie?" he added quickly. "Did he treat you well?"

"Very well," she said with emphasis; and he saw at once he had said the wrong thing. "He was very kind to me. I like him very much." And she gave Davis a cool smile that was both mischievous and reproving. "He always sings songs, and makes me very happy. Can you sing songs, Captain Russell?"

"Can't keep a tune."

"Only Colonel Blakeslie is funny in one way," she went on, reflectively. "Every place he goes he likes to take something. At Siaofeng the Magistrate had an ivory knife to cut paper, and the Colonel liked it very much so he put it in his pocket. I don't know if the Magistrate saw it or not, but he did not say anything. So I asked the Colonel why he did this. And he just laughed and said he liked to collect souvenirs. Is it an American habit—like this?"

Davis smiled, "Not just like that."

"He should not have taken it, I think."

"Taken," said Davis.

She drew in her breath. "Very well—*taken*," she said, smiling all the same. "But don't be like Mr. Hsiung."

Buttercup laughed.

"But really," she went on, "seriously, why does Mr. Hsiung have to be so strict and solemn. I think it's disgusting." She made a wry face. "I think he would like to be a dictator."

"It is good somebody here is like me," said Buttercup, "just serious, hardworking, no complaining." And the usual laughter shook him.

"You!" said Nina, an amused gleam in her dark eyes. "You are just a play boy."

Davis laughed. It was curious, he reflected, how changed she was. That reserve was gone. He had liked that reserve, but this new quick spirit—it was hard to say. There was certainly something fascinating . . . too fascinating. . . .

"But Mr. Hsiung is too proud," Nina was saying. "I don't think I like this man. He makes me nervous, always telling everyone what to do." And she turned on Davis with a sudden defensiveness. "Oh, I know. He is very nice to you and Mr. Wang, but you don't know about George and Miss Chen and me. You ask Miss Chen."

There was a sharp quality to her words that surprised him.

"Now Nina," he said reproachfully. "You hardly know him."

Nina looked a little startled. She seemed to struggle with herself, and in a moment her face relaxed and over it spread a brilliant smile that showed her sharp little teeth, very straight and white.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "Really, I know Mr. Hsiung is a good man. Miss Chen told me so." Her eyes fixed on Davis with a warm gentleness. "I will be very nice to him. I promise it."

Davis smiled a vague approval and glanced at Buttercup; McGuire and Buttercup were very close, Buttercup would resent this criticism, he thought. But Buttercup was staring at the ceiling, his face cheerful and undisturbed. Turning his head, their eyes met, and with a chuckle Buttercup raised his glass. "*Kanpei, kanpei,*" he said loudly. "Everybody drink. Wine shop close up soon. Everybody drink."

And he gave Miss Chen a cup as well. With all eyes on her, the girl blushed, laughed, and blushed again, but at last accepted the cup.

"Here's to Miss Chen," said Davis in Chinese. "The wildest, baddest girl in Wuchuan."

Miss Chen's pink face grew pinker still. "Yueh Hsien-sheng, is too polite!" she murmured; and her eyes meeting Nina's, both girls burst into a fit of giggles.

Out in the night, the air was pleasantly cool. For a moment the subdued sound of the girls' voices followed them as they walked down the path. Little clouds of mist came and went across the path, white and ghostly in the gleam of the flashlight. Davis was lost in thought, his face preoccupied, almost agitated.

Buttercup was the first to speak. "May I tell you something about Miss Lee?" he said.

"Certainly."

"I don't know. Maybe it is more wise to send her away."

"You think she isn't safe?" Davis asked quickly, his preoccupied air suddenly gone.

"No, not that. It is just a feeling. She is too clever."

"What do you mean?" There was a vague alarm in his voice.

"I just feel sometimes perhaps she says something so you get

a good impression on her, but maybe she is thinking something else." He turned, his face shadowy once away from the glare of the light. "Perhaps I'm crazy. I don't know."

"Oh, no, she's all right," said Davis with emphasis. "I'm sure of that."

"Anyway, you must be very careful."

"Don't worry."

Beyond the village the mist grew thicker, muffling their voices so that they had a strange conspiratorial sound.

"I better stop," said Buttercup, "or maybe I get lost going back to the hotel." He laughed, and even his laughter had a furtive quality.

"Well, then I'll see you in September," said Davis. "And I'm sorry about those other supplies."

"No matter. I will send someone as soon as I reach Shanghai. Perhaps they can arrive by that time."

"Easily." They shook hands. "Best of luck."

"Also to you." And the small, compact figure faded silently into the mist, like the vanishing of an apparition.

"It was easier to find his way without the light, there was no glare. But in the dark the night grew more ominous than ever. About him there seemed thousands, millions, pressing in on all sides, yet he walked alone in that white silence. Did he have to believe Buttercup? Did he have to let this spectre of suspicion which came so often between him and these people come between him and Nina, too? Come like the mist—just now, just now, choking off everything, twisting everything? And seeing Nina in his mind's eye, his heart rose and swept away his fear. "It can't!" he said aloud; but in the mist his voice had a weak and lonely sound.

CHAPTER XI

Disheveled Men in Khaki

ONE day a week later Davis walked over to the Navy Hostel. There was word of Major Crump at last and it came not from the Chinese but from a party of Navy men returning to "civilization" from a reconnaissance mission behind the lines. They had met Major Crump, or so Colonel Blakeslie had told Davis.

As Davis climbed the dark stairs to the top floor of the Hostel, the sound of many voices, American voices, grew louder. It was strange, those many American voices; it had been so long since he had heard that collected sound.

The room was full of men in disheveled khaki, at least half a dozen, and there were more on the verandah. The air, blue with smoke, smelled of sweat and tobacco. The men, sprawled about the room or bent over the long table, were talking noisily. Bottles littered the floor. A large gallon jug of water stood in the middle of the table. It stood in a large puddle that was slowly soaking into a pile of magazines. Insects buzzed around a large unshaded lamp, or lay dead on the table.

Paul, who was standing by the door, turned and said, "Hi, Mammy." The talk stopped, and everyone looked up. Paul seemed nervously glad to see him. He had a ruffled look; his thinning hair was in wild disorder. "This is Captain Russell. Got to watch out—he's Army." He laughed uneasily. "You'll have to introduce yourself."

One of the company, a gangling pink-cheeked boy, stood up and shook hands.

"Parkinson, sir!" he said; and Davis looked startled. No one had called him "sir" for a long time. None of the others moved, but several smiled. He could understand that smile. He shook hands awkwardly round the room. Paul had a genius for the awkward thing. The last of them, a heavy set man with a dark growth

of beard, sat up straight at mock attention. "Parkinson, sir," he said.

Several of the men laughed. The man named Parkinson grew red. "All right, Wolfers," he said belligerently, picking at a splinter in the floor. "That's enough out of you, Wolfers."

A man with red hair, who had been talking when Davis came in, raised his hand. "Leave him alone, Parkie." And he turned to the others. "Anyway," he went on, "they blamed it on Carey, and I know damn well it wasn't Carey. . . ."

The crowd settled back, and Davis was forgotten.

He poured himself a drink—rice spirits, the local "gin." Very raw, he thought, and added a little water; not like his own special quality spirits. Then he walked to the verandah. Nielsen and the Colonel were talking earnestly. Beside the Colonel sat the girl Nielsen called Cheetah. The Colonel had one hand on her knee, caressing it gently. She looked bored. In the far corner by the railing was a Navy lieutenant with a red face and dark hair. He sat on the floor, and next to him, to Davis' surprise, was Nina, very pretty in a white silk dress. It was surprising to see any women at the hostel; it was contrary to all Navy regulations.

"Yes," Nielsen was saying, "but then you'd have to raise the voltage."

Davis interrupted. "What's happened?" He waved his hand at Cheetah and Nina.

Nielsen looked up with a smile, and pointed an elbow at the Colonel. "He couldn't get Cheetah to come unless there was another girl, so he asked Nina. I think Nina's a little sore."

"What about Paul?"

Nielsen's smile broadened. "He's scared to death."

"Oh, hell," said the Colonel genially. "They're my guests. What's he worrying about?"

Nina was waving to him, and Davis moved on down the verandah.

"Do you know Mr. Brown?" she said, her voice clipped and formal. "He says to call him just Mister." The lieutenant stood up. "How are you?" he said with a pleasant smile.

Davis knelt down beside him. "Are you the one who ran into Major Crump?"

"Yes, I am," said the other. He shook his head. "The Major gave us quite a time."

"I'll bet he did. What in hell's he up to, anyway?"

"I don't know. The Chinese didn't seem to know either. They kept bothering me about him, asking me who he was, and what he was doing. They're afraid of the Reds, you know. It got embarrassing. You know, they think we ought to know what all the different crazy Americans out here are doing. And I'll be damned if I know what half the Navy's doing."

"Where was he staying?"

"He was living with some general up near the lines, near Meiki, not one of our people. He told me he was on a very important mission. I didn't ask him, he volunteered the information. When I saw him he was collecting silk—don't ask me why. But there's a lot of raw silk in that country, and they can't get it out—no market. What else he's doing I don't know. He kept hinting something very important was going to happen. Then he told me not to make any plans because I'd be home by Christmas. He's quite a character."

"I hope he gets here before Christmas. Did he say when he was coming?"

"No, not a word."

Davis stood up. He had finished his drink and felt like a second. He looked inquiringly at the others. The lieutenant shook his head.

"No, I had three," said Nina, "and I feel somewhat dizzy."

He glanced at her sharply. She was angry all right; he could see it in her face, even in that dim light.

As soon as he entered the living room, someone said in a loud voice:

"Ask the Captain. Ask the Captain."

There was a moment of silence, then a man with light hair and a muscular face moved forward in his chair. The others called him Jablonski.

"I was just saying the Chinese don't drink much."

Wolfer waved a disparaging hand. "Aah, you're drunk yourself, Jabby."

The red-headed man, who was called Joe, looked up from a magazine. "The Chinese don't drink," he said.

"Like hell they don't."

"The Chinese don't drink," Joe repeated. "Just the big shots. You never saw a Chinese drunk on the street."

"What makes you think so?"

"I've been observing conditions," said Joe.

"You never seen one," said Jabby. "And even if you did you wouldn't know it."

"Okay, I haven't," said Wolfers. "So what?"

"So Chinese don't drink," said Joe and went back to his magazine.

"Well all I know," said Wolfers, "is that once I get back to Harrisburg . . ." He ended in a mutter, and began shaking his head. "And to think I volunteered. If they had put me in a straight-jacket, but a volunteer!" He shook his head again, then with sudden amusement turned to a small man with a worn gray face, who lay back in a wicker chair apparently asleep. "Hey, Judge, what was the name of that place?" The other opened an inquiring eye, shielding it from the glare of the light.

"What place was that, Jack?"

"The place where we volunteered."

"It wouldn't have been the Interior Affairs Control?"

"I think it would," said Wolfers.

The Judge straightened up, a tense expression on his face. The rest of the room had quieted, all eyes fixed on him with amused anticipation.

"There we were caught behind them black curtains face to face with a Four Striper." The Judge's voice was filled with awe. "The air was electrified. The Four Striper looks at his stripes, then he looks at Jack and the lack of resemblance don't do Jack no good. But Jack takes it like the Machinists' Mate he still is.

"'Wolfers, you're not the type,' says the Four Striper, soft like. 'We want men,' he says. But Jack don't move.

"'Do you think you could do your work with a knife, Wolfers?' the Four Striper says. It's what you call ironic, he talks ironic. 'I suppose,' he says, 'you'd get sick to your belly if you was forced to get your dinner by eatin' raw moldy rice off'n a dead stinking Jap?' he says. 'I suppose you're the fastidious type.'

"'No, Wolfers, I'm afraid you won't do,' he says, shaking his head and letting you know he's wondering what in hell happened

to them men they used to have in the Navy.

"Jack had took it good, but now he can't take it no more. His face is oozing sweat. Suddenly, he lets out a kind of scream. And the first thing you know, he's down on his knees, he's kissing them four stripes till you can see the tarnish.

"Please, Captain," he hollers, 'leave me go. Give me a chanct, Captain! I can take it! Please leave me go.'"

There was an appreciative roar of laughter around the room.

"By God," said Joe, "they got me too."

"And look at me," said Wolfers. "All I done is make tin stoves. I never seen a Jap. Hell, I can weld a battleship, and all I done is make stoves. And that ain't half of it. Look at Lieutenant Crowley. There's one Marine who's tough, and I mean tough, but the Chinese won't let him go and blow up no bridges cause he might get hurt. It's bad enough to make tin stoves, but to be working for a bunch of Chinese gangsters who ain't even interested in killing no Japs—"

"Wait a minute," Jablonski interrupted. "They killed one last month. I heard some guy who seen it."

"They do better than that," said Paul earnestly. He looked uneasy when all eyes turned on him, but held his course. "It's not that bad. Captain Heller said they got two trains down below Hangchow last month."

"Lieutenant," said Wolfers, with withering superiority, "how many have we trained? About three thousand, five thousand? And they blow up two bridges in July. That's very exemplary. How about that?"

"That was just one place," said Paul. "There's a lot you never heard about."

"Sure, and there's a lot you heard about, and it never happened to occur. Like the bridge at Chientang." He turned to the others.

"After Lieutenant Brown sweats blood showing them just how to set the charge and how much they need and where to put it, so help me they tie it to a dog's tail and scare him out on the bridge. It didn't hurt the bridge none but it sure mangled the dog." He laughed suddenly. "Maybe it was a Jap dog."

"That's just a story," said Paul earnestly. "I've heard it too often."

"It's the facts," said Wolfers. "It's incontestable. No, Lieutenant, you can't kid me. I been over here too long. And I haven't seen nothing yet that has any resemblance of a fighting man. The Chinese don't want to fight, they don't know how to fight, and they never will fight—unless it's some other Chinaman."

"They can fight," said Joe.

Wolfers stared. "Since when was a storekeeper capable of judging the potentiability of a fighting man?"

"Potentiality," said Joe. "Where were you raised? In a coal pit?"

"All right. Where did you ever see a Chinaman fight?"

"I didn't say I saw it. I said they *can* fight. Look at those farmers and coolies they send us. They're tough. I'd give any one of them a hundred pounds, and he'd be walking with it going strong after you was dead and buried. It's their officers; they're just some guy's friends. Mr. Big, he's got a lot of friends, and they got a lot of friends. And Mr. Big being a policeman, most of his friends' friends are crooks, just like at home. Look at the difference when those boys leave camp, they're just sick skeletons covered with scabies because the friends of Mr. Big's friends have been squeezing their rice. Give them a chance, give them something to fight for, and by God they could lick the Russians."

"A fellow told me," said Jablonski, "down in Wenchow, there was a big parade with a couple of bands and firecrackers, all that stuff. And in the middle was a guy in a ricksha bowing to the crowds, and smiling like he was the King of Siam. And this fellow asked some guy what's the occasion, if it was St. Patrick's Day or what was it, and he said no, it's because this guy in the ricksha, he just volunteered for the Chinese Army."

"How about that!" laughed Wolfers. "The poor deluded son-of-a-bitch."

The Judge roused from his stupor. "Leave me go, Captain! Leave me go!"

The others all laughed, and Wolfers put up his hands. "Okay, Judge, you win!"

Then his face clouded. "But all the same, what I'd like to know is, what, for God's sake, is the Navy doing in the interior of China, training a lot of rice paddie commandos? Why up in Mongolia I hear they got a Camel Corps? How about that? Am I sick, or

what? It don't make no sense."

"Here's the way I see it," said Joe. "It's a great conspiracy. What's all the secrecy for about Naval Operations, East China? Just so we don't get to know too much; just to keep us quiet. The Chinese out here aren't all spies."

"It's part of a new idea," said Jablonski. "It's like I heard a man say, the Army's going to take over a couple of fleets 'cause they don't like the way the Navy's running things."

"That ain't the same," said Wolfers, "but if you was to say the Army was training Chinese coolies to take over them fleets then you'd have something. Hell, I wisht I'd just done like my brother, let the Army draft me. He's sitting out in California, running a canteen; and there are so many women begging him to bed every night, he's wore out. Imagine that." And imagining it himself, a sick longing spread over the bearded face of Wolfers.

"Don't fool yourself," Davis broke in. "I can tell you from intimate personal contact with the Army, that you're better off where you are."

The Judge opened his eyes. "Captain, you and me both."

Wolfers smiled. "We even got a lousy Army sergeant in our outfit. It don't make sense."

"It's just somebody screwed up my orders," said the Judge.

"Well, I wish somebody would screw up mine," said Wolfers. "I don't want to make no more tin stoves for no generals, I don't want to architect no more latrines for a lotta coolies."

"The coolies are all right," said Joe. "It's the gangsters on top. As I see it, all you need in China to be a gangster is a education. Sure, you can get a few thugs to fight their way up the ladder, but if you have a education you don't have to go up no ladder. You don't have to even get out of bed. You're above spilling your blood. That's for the coolies. And you don't have to grow rice, or dig coal; you just count it when the coolies bring it in, and collect fifty percent for your trouble. That's why they all want to be educated. If a Chinese can afford a fountain pen, he'll stick it on his chest so nobody won't think he can't write." Joe was growing eloquent. "Why once I saw a Chinese with tortoise shell glasses, only there weren't any glass in them. It don't make sense, unless you understand what education means over here. That guy was just hanging

on for dear life to being a educated man. Why the kids practically kill each other to get into college. Back in the States I heard how the kids of China were working themselves to the bone to get a education. They were heroes. Imagine! Of all the goddamn propaganda—why just the privilege of staying out of the Army is worth thirty years of going to high school! Who the hell wouldn't work himself to the bone?"

Davis was still leaning against the verandah door, smiling appreciatively. He liked Joe; Joe was all right. Seeing him smile, Joe smiled back.

"That right, Captain?"

"I guess it is," said Davis.

"You got to be educated," said Joe, "if you want to eat more than once in a week. Or be a bandit."

"They're all a bunch of bandits," said Wolfers. "There's not one you can trust with two dollars. If there is, they ought to put him in a museum."

"There was a fellow at Lungho," said Jablonski. "He broke his leg and some old farmer carried him five miles back to camp. We sent the farmer some money and a picture of George Washington. He sent the money back and the next week he walked 10 miles over to camp and back to thank us for the picture. And he didn't know who the picture was; he thought it was Roosevelt."

"Yeah?" said Wolfers. "Well, they ought to put him in a museum."

For some time Davis had been vaguely aware of someone standing near him in the doorway, now the figure moved forward a little and he saw it was Nina. Her face had a taut whiteness, and her eyes were blazing.

"They ought to put you in a museum!" she said in a tight voice that burned with anger.

For a moment, no one moved. A paralysis gripped the room, each man staring at the fierce little figure in the doorway, whose very presence, rightly or wrongly, seemed to give the lie to all the effusive comment and observation that had flowed from that assemblage of philosophers, demeaning their words and minds till there was little left of them except their large bodies, their dirty faces and their sweaty clothes.

Joe was the first to speak. He was smiling happily.

"Lady, you've got something," he said.

Nina's anger remained undiminished. "If you don't like China, why don't you go home?"

"Oh, brother," said Wolfers, "just tell Captain Heller. Those are sweet, sweet words."

"Why don't you all go home? China is much nicer if you all go home. What do you think about the war, you think it makes every Chinese person rich and clean and pleased to live? You don't even know what are we fighting for."

"Okay," said Wolfers. "What are we fighting for?"

"I ask you!" she cried.

"A fellow I met," said Jablonski suddenly. "He told me he never knew what he was fighting for till he seen them pieces of Chinese cardboard they give you in latrines."

"Look," said Joe, "when you talk to a lady, you don't talk about latrines." He turned to Nina, "Look," he said soothingly, "we're just talking. See? We're just talking. If you were in the States, you could talk too. You could say anything you want. We were just saying in China the little guy doesn't have a chance—not unless he's got a fountain pen and some tortoise shell glasses."

"America is just the same," said Nina recklessly.

"It's pretty bad, but it's not the same."

"You're damn right it's not the same," said Wolfers.

Nina's fury flared back. "You're a *bitch*!" she cried, spitting out the epithet with surprising venom.

Wolfers laughed. "How about that?" He rubbed the black stubble on his cheeks. "The bearded bitch."

Jablonski had begun to scowl. "Why don't you just jump off the porch," he suggested. "It'll end all your troubles."

Nina drew back her hand as if to hurl her wine cup at Jablonski, but Davis caught her arm. She turned wildly at the restraining pressure.

"You!" she hissed, her bosom heaving.

"Nina," he said quietly, but his grip grew firmer the more she struggled. "Please." He was frowning slightly.

"Just throw her over the balcony," Jablonski muttered.

"Leave them alone," said Joe. Out on the verandah Nielsen had

started up his gramophone. A brass band was squeaking out a Sousa march. "Hey, Judge," Joe called. "There's your cue."

The Judge suddenly sat up. "Don't crowd, folks," he said, waving his arms. "Plenty of room inside. It'll not cost you a cent, folks, just one thin dime, to see that most *sen-sational* Serpent Act, of this or any century,—one dime, folks—that acid-armpit Amazon, the one and only, the amazing . . ."

Nina suddenly relaxed, her mouth trembled, and she burst into tears. For a moment she swayed toward Davis, then wrenched free and ran to the hall. He could hear the rapid beat of her feet as she fled down the stairs. He hesitated a moment, then moved quickly to the door.

". . . just one dime, folks. Why, lady, she eats them poisonous reptiles alive. . . ."

The voice faded as the door closed behind him and he ran down the complaining stairs. The landing below was dark, and he did not see her at once but he heard the sound of her sobbing.

"I lost my shoe," she gasped through her tears.

A light flooded on above them, and Paul's distressed face appeared over the banister. "Anything I can do?"

Davis shook his head. "Don't worry about us."

Nina had found her shoe; and they walked on down the stairs without a word, her weeping quieter, but sobs still catching at her breath.

Out on the street, he turned her toward the river and she made no complaint. Moving down through the old gate in the city wall, a rat scurried across their path. She shivered and clutched his arm.

"I hate rats," she whispered. Then in a moment, "Where are we going?"

"Home. This path leads to the bridge. It's the quickest way."

A new moon, fragile but bright, bathed the earth in a silver light. A thin line of cloud hung soft and white among the pale stars. Above them the battlements of the city towered black and ancient. Along the river the junks stood silent, the forest of their masts casting spidery shadows on the water. Here and there a riding light glowed faintly, subdued by the brightness of the moon. The night was very still. They could hear the murmur of the river under the junks, and the sound of Nielsen's gramophone. Somewhere far off

a voice was singing, a melancholy song that yet had a wildness in it. From the direction of the bridge came the intermittent tinkling of a vendor's bell.

She stopped suddenly and waved an arm. "I like it," she said. Then she turned to him. He could see the tear stains on her cheeks. "You are angry with me."

"No."

"But you think I am very silly and foolish?"

"A little," he smiled. "I don't like to see you lose your temper."

She looked away and they walked on. "I know it," she said softly. "I feel ashamed. It only makes everything worse."

"No," he said again. "I don't blame you for getting angry. But it makes you, anybody, somewhat . . . unreasonable. They're just ordinary men, and they have some reason to complain. They feel they're being abused; it makes them mad. And that's good. One of the terrible things in China is that so many people suffer abuse, and never complain, don't dare complain, have no way of complaining."

"But it's not true everybody in China is rotten. That's what made me angry. It always hurts me to hear people say that."

He smiled gently. "Of course not. But there will always be Americans stupid enough to think that."

They had reached the stone steps which led from the river path to the bridge, and she ran up the steps with sudden animation. Near the top she swayed suddenly and would have stumbled if he had not caught her. She giggled as she straightened up.

"I'm sorry. I had too much wine," she said, then turned inquiringly. "You like Colonel Blakeslie?"

"Yes . . . yes, I like him. Why?"

"I hate him," she said simply. "If he had not asked me to go that place, then I would not have been angry. And if I had not been angry, I would not have drunk all that strong wine. And then I would not have had any fight with the Navy. Blakeslie just wanted me to come so that other woman would come. That was not very kind. And that woman is just like an animal."

When they reached the Farmhouse, he hung back a little, while she searched for her key. "Come in," she said. "I will give you some tea."

"I think you better go to bed."

"Oh, no," she pleaded. "It's quite early. Anyway, I must have some tea."

Stooping to unlock the door, she swayed and would have fallen against it if he had not caught her round the waist. At the touch of his arm, she straightened, turned slowly, put her arms about his neck and clung to him with sudden desperation, her head on his shoulder. In a moment she looked up, her face very sober, tears glistening in her eyes. Then she kissed him, a most searching kiss.

She moved her head away at last and her lips brushed his ear. "Davis," she whispered, her voice as warm as her breath, "I love you, Davis."

He drew back, his hands trembling. He could only smile and moisten his lips. At last he frowned. "You should be in bed."

He pushed the door open, and led her into the room. He found the lamp, and in a moment the room leapt into view.

She swayed back against the door, so that it creaked shut, and just stood there staring at him.

"You are very strong," she whispered as if to herself. "I feel your legs and body against me. Like iron. I want to curl up inside you. Then I cannot be afraid of anything."

"You better have some tea," he muttered, and turned to the kettle that stood on a small oil burner. He struck another match and lit the burner. Then he sat down weakly on a small cot that had been converted into a couch, and stared moodily at the yellow flame under the kettle. He felt panic-stricken; it was as if his mind as well as his body had mutinied. There was no personal authority left.

She moved to the couch uncertainly and knelt down beside him. A hand closed on one of his. He switched about abruptly, facing her, and with a smile she collapsed against him, her eyes closed.

"I feel so sleepy," she said.

He raised her erect and put a hand under her chin. It was unbelievably soft. Her eyes remained closed but she still smiled. He stared at her parted lips, the straight nose, the dark lashes; and as he stared his face grew distraught.

"Nina," he murmured. "Nina, look at me."

Her dark eyes opened and her face grew solemn.

"You don't love me," she said in a voice scarcely audible.

He drew his hand back and looked down gloomily at the kettle. His breath came and went unevenly. "I'm afraid I do," he whispered at last, then glanced up with quick bitter appeal. "But, Nina, it's—" His mouth sagged. "We shouldn't let this feeling overwhelm us. You see, after the war, that will only make everything so much harder. Perhaps in a year, perhaps six months . . ."

"If we have six months, it is better than nothing at all." She looked very happy, but a little puzzled. "Anyway, if you love me, you love me. You cannot stop it."

"We could stop seeing each other. I could send you away."

"Oh, no. That is too silly."

"Yes, but . . . but there are other things to think of."

"You love your wife? It is not true, I think."

"I'm very fond of her. And then I feel strongly—"

"You want to be faithful?"

"I want to be fair, honest. I don't want to hurt her. I have no right to hurt her."

"I am also married but I love you," she said, her arms rising about his neck. "I don't care about anything else."

"Yes, but you have never lived with your husband. You're not exactly his wife. It's not the same."

She smiled, and bending forward, kissed his neck, sniffed luxuriously, then twisted over across his lap. "Biscuits," she giggled. "You smell like biscuits."

He looked down at her, at her dark eyes, her sun-tanned cheeks, her throat, her bosom swelling up under her white silk dress.

"Biscuits," he said absently. "What an imagination."

Then gathering her in his arms he stood up. "You're going to bed," he murmured, and carried her to the back of the room. He laid her gently on the cover, straightened her skirt, and stood up.

"Please bring me some tea," she whispered, and her eyes closed.

"Just a minute," he said; and walking back to the couch, he felt the kettle. It was hot but there was no simmer from the water. He looked at the bed. She hadn't moved and her breathing was deep and regular. "Asleep," he thought. "No use to bother with the tea."

He walked back to the bed, stared down at her a moment, then pulled off her shoes and unbuttoned her collar. Again, he simply

stared, unable to leave. Then he drew the cover from under her, and covered her with the top sheet. She had not moved and her breathing was as deep as ever. A faint smile showed at the corners of her mouth. Her cheeks glowed faintly in the lamplight, and he could see drops of perspiration gathered on her forehead. At the sight he drew back the sheet, methodically unbuttoned her dress and drew it off. He screwed up his eyes at the pink silk beneath, at the ivory whiteness of her body, as if by this gesture he protected both her modesty and his conduct as a gentleman.

At last he returned to the tea. But sitting down, his foot hit the burner, and the kettle went over with a hissing clatter. He set it right in a moment; then heard a stir behind him. He glanced back, and saw her sit up. She turned slowly, clutching the sheet to her throat, and as their eyes met she smiled shyly.

"Please, one moment, please turn your back," she said. "Is the tea ready?"

"Almost," he murmured. If he had not refused to see this coming, he might not be so helpless now, he thought morosely; then he defied her orders and glanced at the bed. She was kneeling on the sheet, her arms above her head, a nightgown wriggling down over her shoulders. His eyes came away with a wrench.

There was a creak on the floor by the bed, then a creak on the couch behind him; and before he could move two soft hands slipped by his neck.

He took a deep breath. "Nina—" Then he turned and looked into her dark eyes, and all the breath left him. "I suppose I'm . . ." His words trailed off. His arms rose about her, catching under the disarray of her gown, so that one hand came up against the bare of her back. How smooth and soft it was, smoother and softer than the silk she wore. It seemed to close over him like the sea, draw him down, that smooth softness, the dark, swirling fragrance of her hair, the sweetness of her breath . . .

On the floor the kettle began to simmer, then to boil; and as it boiled, a misty spume of steam rose singing from its spout. . . .

CHAPTER XII

Home by Christmas

DAVIS took a firmer grip of the stone weights, put his legs apart and repeated the exercise. He could feel the sweat running down his chin, his chest, his stomach; he peered down at his naked body, even his legs were wet and gleaming. He drew in a deep breath and let it out in a windy puff, then put the weights down. As he did so there was a knock at the side of the open door leading into his office.

"Yes?" he said with a start, and seized a towel from the bottom of the bed.

It was only Ching. "Here is a letter," said Ching. "A farmer bring it. He say no hurry. He just wait outside."

He put the letter on the bed and retreated. Davis wiped the sweat from his eyes, secured the towel about his middle, and picked up the letter. It was from Nina.

Nina had spent Sunday with some friends in the country, and he supposed this meant she was delayed getting back.

He took it to the window, wiping again at his eyes. It began. "Dear Captain Russell." The formality struck him as strange.

He held the letter to the light.

"Dear Captain Russell,

Please come right away. This farmer will show you the place. And please bring \$20,000 CNC.

Nina Lee"

He read the letter again and then a third time, and with each reading grew more nervous. "This is it," he thought, "something's happened." Since Nina's return neither he nor Maguire had been able to discover anyone who regarded her with any suspicion, though questions about Colonel Blakeslie and his experience were common enough. He thought it queer, not quite natural; and Maguire thought so, too.

But now it was clear, something had happened.

He bent his head close to the window screen. "Ching," he called. "Tell *Ta Shih-ju*, just some orange juice and toast and coffee. I have to leave in ten minutes."

"*Hao*," Ching's voice came back; and muttering uneasily to himself, Davis hurried into the shower.

As he gulped his breakfast, he eyed the farmer who stood waiting patiently by the side of the Temple. He was a little man with a friendly face. If Maguire were here, Davis thought, anyone but Ching, he might question the man. He didn't dare ask Ching, not knowing what sort of trouble Nina might be in. Again, he might waken the Colonel, take him along; but he gave up the thought almost at once. The Colonel was no diplomat.

Before he had finished his coffee he started for the jeep. The jeep, shaking and snorting like a race horse, seemed as anxious as he to get away. He motioned the farmer to climb in beside him, released the brake, then with a muttered exclamation pulled it tight again, jumped out and ran to his office. The money—he had completely forgotten the money. But at the door he stopped. Twenty thousand—he had just paid the staff; he didn't have twenty thousand.

But he turned into the office anyway to get his cap which was on top of the file. Also on the file was his pistol; and seeing it, he strapped it round his waist.

Near the bottom of the drive, he relaxed a little and lit a cigarette, holding the wheel with his elbows.

Ta Shih-tze was a noisy bustle of activity, crowded with farmers, piles of fruit and vegetables. He honked his way through the shouting crowd, conscious of the fresh smell of the country produce. There was that smell, and the good taste of the cigarette, and the feel of the coffee inside him. But for this anxiety he would have enjoyed the morning.

At the top of Ta Shih-tze he pulled the jeep into the curb before an imposing building with plaster pillars made to resemble stone. Above the door of this building were the Chinese characters in gold relief, *Neng Jen Ying Han*—"The Farmers' Bank."

A doorman eyed him curiously.

"Has anyone come yet?" he asked in Chinese. "Has Mr. Tan come?"

"The bank opens at nine," said the doorman.

"I know. But has anyone come yet?"

"Not till eight o'clock."

Davis compressed his lips. It was not yet seven. He was about to turn the jeep toward the Navy Hostel when the crowd about him opened up, and there was Mr. Tien walking toward him, brushing people aside with his cane.

Davis leaned out of the jeep. "You haven't got twenty thousand dollars, have you?"

Mr. Tien came forward smiling. "Oh, Captain Russell. Good morning. What is it? What do you say?"

"I wondered if you had twenty thousand dollars."

Mr. Tien laughed. "Why such a hurry? Are you going to catch a train?"

"No," said Davis. "No train. I have to meet a man out in the country. I owe him twenty thousand. He's leaving for Pingsien right away, and I'm short of cash."

Mr. Tien considered. "I'm not going to the bank. It's not open yet. But no matter. Come to my house. I can give it to you." And with an expert wave of his cane, Mr. Tien indicated to the farmer that he take the back seat and squeezed his heavy frame in beside Davis.

Mr. Tien lived in a narrow street near the eastern end of the city. It was a large house, dark and forbidding, but with a peculiar aromatic smell. A servant led them to a small ante chamber, Mr. Tien bellowing to someone who answered distantly.

Davis sat down on a stiff teakwood chair and mopped his face. Mr. Tien sat opposite, his cane between his legs.

"This man in the jeep," he asked in a low voice, widening his small eyes and bending forward so that his chin almost touched the top of the cane. "Who is he? Is he quite all right?"

"He's just a farmer," Davis smiled. "He's showing me the way."

"Where are you going?"

But before Davis could answer, another servant appeared. Mr. Tien turned and gave the man a key, speaking rapidly in Shanghai dialect. Davis watched uneasily. He was regretting this move; Mr. Tien was too curious.

"To tell the truth, I don't know exactly," he said when the

servant had gone. "Somewhere on the Meihsien road. This man knows the place."

The first servant appeared with some tea, and Mr. Tien waited till he had gone, then he smiled genially.

"Anyway," he said, "I am glad to help you. I see it is quite urgent." He lit a cigarette. "Well, how is everything? How is the work? I hear Major Crump is not back yet." Suddenly, his eyebrows rose, and the smile became amused. "I hear you have a new staff member. Quite pretty, eh?" And he laughed comfortably. "She's the one you told me about one night, isn't she?"

Davis felt his hands grow moist. He'd forgotten that. And suddenly he decided that perhaps the safest policy would be to tell the truth.

"Yes, she's the same one," he said. "The Soochow girl I told you about."

Mr. Tien bent forward. "Do you remember? I told you that night I will be glad to investigate anyone you engage. So I took the liberty . . ."

Davis remembered vaguely, and the other's words struck at him like cold water.

". . . and I can tell you," Mr. Tien was saying, "she is quite reliable. I know about her family and her background. She is really a respectable girl. She is the best type of westernized Shanghai girl. You are quite lucky to find her." He paused. "But you should not have let her go to Changhsing. I know she just went to see her family, but you see some people might suspect her—because of the *Hsien-fei*. Also just now it is quite dangerous." His face grew sober. "You know about Mashan?"

Davis nodded. Mashan had been captured by the Communists, and the Wuchuan officials were upset; some had even sent their families off to cities in the southwest. "Yes, I know about it," he said, smiling broadly, not at that piece of news but because of the relief he felt in the unexpected comment on Nina.

It was curious, he thought. Perhaps Mr. Tien had not grasped Major Crump's remarks the night of the dinner; or perhaps he had, and simply didn't care, now that he believed Nina harmless. It was entirely reasonable, and Mr. Tien could be reasonable. He had grown so accustomed to suspecting the Chinese of hidden mean-

ings, that too often he overlooked the obvious. And in the amiable feeling he had for Mr. Tien at the moment only an inner caution kept him from confessing the true purpose of his trip.

"You are in a hurry," said Mr. Tien when the money had come and they had driven back as far as Tien Mu Ta Lu. "You have to turn left, and I go the other way." He climbed precipitately from the jeep, then pointed his cane at the farmer. "Are you sure he knows where he's going?" And before Davis could answer he asked the man the question.

"Wulishih," said the farmer.

"He knows," said Davis. "Many thanks." And he let the jeep roll forward before the other could ask any more questions. Mr. Tien had been very decent, but he was still much too curious.

Beyond the crumbling ruins that marked the South Gate, the country opened up in a broad sweep of valley dotted with farms and ponds and clumps of trees. The road was good because it was little used. It had once run all the way to Hangchow but now ran no further than Meihsien, a small town, little more than a village, just ten miles from the South Gate. It was a sleepy road even at that early hour; now and then they passed a farmer going home from market, his wheelbarrow empty, a soldier or two shuffling along in the dust and once a solitary ricksha lurching from side to side like a drunken reveller staggering home from a night of carousal.

But the fields, rich with golden tasselled rice, still standing or gathered in sheaves, were full of harvesters, men, women, and children, all busily toiling away to bring in the grain that was their life.

The whole scene, the quiet road and the busy countryside, the low green hills and the dark mountains, the cloudless arch of the sky, all had a peace that might have softened the anxiety Davis felt; but with each passing stone that marked the distance from Wuchuan, his anxiety grew. Just beyond the fifth kilometer mark the farmer tapped his arm.

"*Tso pien, tso pien*," he cried, "To the left, to the left."

Davis slowed the jeep, backed it up, and turned into a narrower road that led off among fields and grave mounds toward a walled-in group of buildings a quarter of a mile away. There was a single

gate in the wall, and just before it, shading a grassy plot, stood a towering hardwood tree. At the farmer's direction he stopped the jeep by a path that led to the gate. The farmer waved him toward the gate; and leaping from the jeep, Davis ran toward it, his excitement increasing with every step. But at a turn in the path, he caught his foot on a stone, staggered a few feet and fell headlong into a thicket of weeds at the side of a grave mound.

As he rose, shaking his head and clutching at his pistol belt, he was startled by a familiar voice. He looked up quickly; and there in the shade of the hardwood tree, in a familiar blue cotton dress, stood Nina.

"It's not necessary to run," she called. "There isn't any trouble."

He opened his mouth, but at once closed it, compressing his lips. He walked toward her, then stopped, his face suddenly very red.

"Goddamn it! why the devil do you send me messages like that?"

"I'm sorry." Her face was suddenly troubled. "I told the Major that you might get worried, but he said it cannot be helped. He said just to write the note like that so no one will know."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Major Crump. He is staying here. He came last night. He came over the pass by Nine Dragon Mountain, by Chou Lung Shan. And the road comes just near here. I met him on the road, and he decided to stay here. He's afraid to go to Wuchuan. He says it is too dangerous. I don't know why."

As she talked a familiar figure in army khaki appeared at the gate, let out an exclamation and came running forward, smiling cheerfully.

"Hello," said Lincoln Liang, pushing back his long hair. "I have returned."

Davis greeted him without enthusiasm. That hair, he thought; if he would only cut that hair. "Where's the Major?"

"I will just get him," said Lincoln, and ran back through the gate.

His eyes came back to Nina, and she smiled at him with a look full of love. "Please don't be irritated," she whispered.

He smiled back, threw out his hands and sat down against the tree.

"By the way," he said, "I've found a useful ally in case you're

ever accused of Communist connections, my friend Mr. Tien. I'm quite sure he knows everything, but he's checked up on you and says you're harmless."

He stopped, surprised. For an instant he thought he had seen a look of fright in her face. But if he had, it passed so quickly he decided he was mistaken. She was frowning.

"I don't know why, but I agree with Mr. Hsiung," said Nina. "I don't like this man."

He would have replied, but a sound of footsteps interrupted him. His eyes moved beyond her, and with a smile he struggled to his feet.

"Well, Major—welcome home."

The Major was bustling toward him, very brisk and business-like, a small leather bag in one hand. He looked immaculate, even his boots had a shine; but for the absence of a tie he might have been emerging from an Officers' Club in a post in the United States.

"Hello, Russell," he said. "Good to see you again. You've got your jeep, I see. You didn't bring the trailer, I suppose. I've got about a thousand pounds of stuff." He turned briskly to Nina. "Excuse me, but do you mind if we talk alone."

"Of course not." She had become as reserved as she had been when Davis first met her, and with a slight bow walked gravely away to the gate. The Major peered about him, saw two boys some forty yards away, shooed them off, then sat down by Davis, raising his leather bag to his lap.

"There," he said in a whisper, tapping the bag, "there is a gold mine. This is hot—really hot!" He sat back. "Oh, by the way, did you bring the money?"

Davis nodded.

"Good. I owe these people a lot. Coolies, food—so on." He puffed out his cheek. "Now, here's the story. I've got to be off tomorrow morning, early. I'll need both the jeep and trailer. That's all right, I suppose? I'll send them back right away. Good—well, here's the plan. I'll give you whatever the jeep can hold now, and I'll come on in after dark—in a ricksha. Then I'd like to take off in the morning, about six."

Davis had been watching the Major with increasing amusement. He had no idea what the other had in mind, but somehow his be-

havior seemed perfectly in character. He could see that the Major no longer had any use for him other than as a cog in a machine that could help him attain his mysterious ends, whatever those might be.

"Can I ask," he smiled, "what this is all about? I mean this urgency—this secrecy."

He had a feeling that the Major, if he had stumbled across anything important, would not be able to keep it secret long.

"Well," said Major Crump slowly, "I can't tell you much; but I can say this: I have some very important information, and I happen to know—" his voice grew solemn, full of significance—"that Wuchuan is riddled with spies. And, incidentally, Tien is right. You'd do much better in Pinghsien. But I'll come to that in a moment. The point is,—" he tapped the leather bag—"the point is, this stuff is too important to treat lightly. I want to stay out of Wuchuan. I don't want anyone to know I'm back."

Davis said nothing. He was certain that Wuchuan was not riddled with spies; if it were, he would have discovered at least some evidence of it in the six months he had been there. The Japanese just did not have enough money to riddle a place the size of Wuchuan with spies. But if fear of spies would hurry the Major on his way, so much the better.

"By the way," said Davis, "before I forget it, I wish you would call on General Huang in Pinghsien. He's phoned half a dozen times about you. It would make my position easier if you explained your trip, quieted him down a little. He's getting very suspicious, of me as well as you, and so are all the people here."

The Major made a deprecating gesture with his hand. "If I called on all the generals who are suspicious, I'd never get out of the area. It's just damn nonsense." He fished out his notebook. "No, the only man I intend to see . . ." His voice subsided as he searched for the name. "The only one is General Huang Ming-ih."

Davis laughed. "That's the one."

"Well, of course. General Huang. I've got some information for him. This General Tsai in Meiki is his man. Of course, he wants to see me." He smiled importantly. "He's the top in this whole area, you know. General Huang."

Then his smile faded and a furtive look came into his face. He peered about him, at the two boys in the distance, at Nina and an-

other young woman who were talking and laughing in the gate.

Unlocking the little bag, he drew out several papers, and quickly locked the bag again. But in the glimpse he had of the contents, Davis could see it was crammed with maps and documents, some in Japanese script. And that glimpse made him envious. However stupid the Major might be, there was no denying that he might have picked up some important information.

"Are you going to let me see any of those things?" he asked, glancing at the bag.

"I can let you see some of them," said the Major, and an irritating smile spread across his red face, a sly smile that said plainly: "Oh, no, you don't. No one's going to steal any credit from Crump." But the smile was evanescent. "I'd like to let you see all of it, but I can't," he said seriously. "You see, it comes right out of the horse's mouth—right from the Japs." His voice had dropped to a whisper. "From a puppet general who's just come over to this side. If the Chinese, the big shots, knew I had this stuff, they'd blow their tops. It's too hot. But I'll tell you one thing." He paused to rustle the papers in his hands. "You'll be home by Christmas." He paused again to savor the significance of his remark. "Yes, sir, you'll be home by Christmas. And that's why I wanted you to come out here."

"You mean," said Davis, "that if I keep on down the Meihsien Road I'll be home by Christmas."

The other chuckled. "You might at that. No, what I mean is this. I want you to get this stuff off to Headquarters." He rustled the papers again. "Urgent, top secret, and if you don't mind I wish you'd code it yourself." He glanced through the first two sheets. "These are not so important in the light of the last one. But it's good stuff anyway—battle order, so on. Also details on this tunnel from Korea over to Japan. That's quite a feat—a hundred miles under water, from Fusan to Shimonoseki. You'd think it was impossible."

"I certainly would."

"But this is the real thing," said the Major, picking up the bottom paper. "This is it, pal. Oh, brother, this is it!" He turned and stared hard at Davis. "How long will it take you to evacuate Wuchuan?"

"I don't know exactly. Two days if I take everything. Why? Are we about to be attacked?"

The Major waved the last message with an air of triumph, then bent forward, his voice subdued. "This is what I've been telling you about. You've heard where the Reds are? They've taken Mashan. But do you know who they are working for? Do you know that?"

"Themselves, as far as I know."

"Not on your life—they're tied in with the Japs. I told you about this puppet general. And he knows. Don't ask me how. I can't tell you. But I happen to know he knows." He paused to let the enormity of this revelation sink in. "And that's not all. Just as soon as the summer breaks, the Japanese are putting on a general offensive, not just here but everywhere. And they've pulled the Reds in with them. And I'll tell you why. They're licked and they know it, but they are going to raise one last hell of a big hullabaloo. Then they'll sue for peace, and stand a hell of a lot better chance of getting the terms they want. Anyway, that's their plan. And they don't give a damn who they drag in with them. If the Reds can help, that's fine. All they want is a good show."

"I see," said Davis. It was possible, he supposed; the idea had a certain plausibility. Even the Communist participation; it fitted into their pattern, too—anything to extend their control. But it still had the fake sound of propaganda. There was nothing concrete to support it except that one little incident—the capture of Mashan. As for Japanese peace feelers, they were a dime a dozen. "Well," he added, skeptically, "when does the deluge come? When will it hit Wuchuan?"

"By the end of August. You've got about a month—five weeks at the most."

"I see," said Davis, and glanced at his watch, as if to ascertain just exactly how much time he did have before the deluge broke. "If you want me to radio these things this morning, I better go. It's almost nine."

The Major climbed quickly to his feet. "Yes, of course. I'll get them to load this gear of mine." And he tramped hurriedly away.

Aside from personal gear the Major had eight large bundles sewed up in oil cloth.

"Most of it's silk," the Major explained. "In Kunming you can

get a couple of dollars a yard for good silk. And I guess I've got about two thousand yards. And I didn't pay more than four hundred. Pretty good, eh? Of course, it's also possible the army will be interested; parachutes, so on. They need silk, you know. I'm not just thinking of myself."

"Oh, sure," said Davis, then smiled. "Coming with us?" he added, unable to resist a gibe at the other's elaborate secrecy. But the Major merely shook his head.

Climbing behind the wheel—Nina was already in the other seat—he drove out to the Meihsien Road. To offset the growing heat, he opened the windshield and the wind whistled about them.

Nina looked very attractive, he thought, leaning back, the wind tossing her hair about. It was good to be alone with her. He put out a hand and squeezed her knee.

She did not oppose him, but in a moment put a soft hand on top of his. "Do you like the wind?" she asked. "It always makes me feel something very exciting is going to happen." She turned with a smile. "Is anything exciting going to happen, do you think?"

"The Major and the Colonel are leaving tomorrow morning. That's pretty exciting, pleasantly exciting."

"But isn't there anything really exciting?"

"Nothing else," he said absently.

"What about Mashan? Dr. Tsai, my friend here, told me about it. He's very excited. So I told him don't worry, the Communists are not so terrible."

"Nina, you're supposed to forget the Communists, not even think about them."

"What do you want me to do," she whispered mockingly, "just think about you?" And her hand crawled shyly through the opening in his sleeve and gently rubbed his arm. Then to his surprise tears gathered in her eyes, and she raised her head to the wind so that it might brush them away. "I don't need anything else," she said huskily. "I shouldn't think of anything else because I know the time is so short, and I will never be so happy again."

"So much for supplies," said the Major. "Is there anything more? Oh, those medical kits." He made another note in his book.

Davis sat back, smiled perfunctorily, and shook his head. "No,

nothing more."

"And stop thinking the British are so much better at intelligence than we," said the Major with a chuckle. "For my money we have the best damn outfit in China."

"Maybe, but they're getting news from Japan, and we aren't. Those are the facts, and what's more—"

But the Major wasn't listening. He was peering out the door where the lights of the city were faintly visible through the cloth screening. "What's that?" he muttered.

A distant sound of singing was growing louder.

*"Way upstairs with the Fourteenth Air force
Up in the air, pilots true . . ."*

"Who's that?" he asked, chuckling again. "They used to sing that down in Suichuan."

"That's the Colonel," said Davis.

"With their noses in the blue, in the brown, in the blue!"

"Say, that's the stuff," the Major chuckled, and moved to the door. As the Colonel came in view, he pushed the door open.

*"When you hear those engines missing,
When those propellers begin to whine. . . ."*

At this point the Major joined in loudly:

*"Then you'll know that Casey Williams
is way behind the firing li-i-ine."*

"At-a-boy, Colonel. That's the stuff. Old Suichuan, eh?" He laughed heartily, and stepped out on the porch. "I'm Major Crump, Ernest Crump. Glad to have you aboard, Colonel." And he laughed again.

"How about that?" said the Colonel. "Glad to see you, Major."

There had been no conflict, Davis reflected; but the Major's attitude was puzzling. Not just disinterest, more than that, a condescension, a little as if he, Davis, had to be humored. But then nothing mattered as long as he was left alone.

And with that hope he rose from his chair and walked to the door.

"Come on in," he called, "and have a drink."

"Did you say drink?" the Colonel asked, sticking his head in the room; and his eye lit on a bottle the Major had produced. "Homeside corn!" he exclaimed. "Captain, you may get a promotion in a couple of years."

"It's mine, as a matter of fact," the Major put in. But the Colonel paid him no attention. Finding a glass, he filled it, and sipped the amber liquid, then slouched into a chair. "Homeside corn," he said again. "How about that!"

"By the way, I saw your friend General Tsai up in Meiki," the Major smiled. "He asked me to give you his best. He's a great fellow."

"Not old pock-face General Tsai!" The Colonel shook his head. "What a fire-eater! I'll bet he swooned when the Reds took Mashan."

"Well," said the Major, somewhat taken aback. "He's pretty careful, but if you get to know him, he's quite a fellow. You noticed how smooth everything went after you landed in his hands. You noticed that, didn't you?"

"Oh, sure, sure. Thanks to my little old interpreter."

The Major's face took on a look at once unctuous and aggressive. "That's what you think, Colonel. I don't want to take away any glory from your girl friend, but frankly you'd have had a devil of a time getting over the border and down here if certain little arrangements hadn't been made." He smiled significantly, and slapped the Colonel's leg. "Certain little arrangements, eh?"

"Do tell?" the Colonel smiled back.

"I mean that's why I went north. Ask Russell. We knew there'd be trouble, and someone had to grease the wheels, you know." He shrugged his shoulders. "Yes, we had them spread the red carpet all the way down to Wuchuan." And he laughed genially.

"I'll be damned," said the Colonel, raising his glass. "Well, here's to you, Maj. Why, damn it, everything went so smooth, I wouldn't have known you were anywheres around."

"Exactly," the Major replied, his face serious. "It would have attracted too damn much attention. And to hell with sticking my neck out."

"That's the spirit, Maj, and whether you like it or not, by God,

I'll see that you get a citation. Damn if I won't."

A veil seemed to descend over the Major's eyes. "Oh, hell, I didn't do anything. But, I tell you, I wrote up a report on the thing. You might like to see it and if you could just give it a sort of endorsement, that would be swell." He chuckled comfortably. "Just your name on that little old dotted line."

"Certainly, certainly. Wouldn't think of anything less." The Colonel turned to Davis and winked an eye. "Let's have another. I want to drink to the Major. Why if it weren't for the Major I'd be lying out on one of those goddam mountains starving to death."

"But anyway," the Major beamed, "you would have known that good old Casey Williams—" he broke into song—"was still behind that firing li-i-ine."

CHAPTER XIII

The ABC Café

SLOWLY the summer passed. The Small Heat gave way to the Great Heat but it was not as severe as the Small Heat. And when it passed, there were gray days with cool north winds, and when the sun shone again its heat was measurably less, and in the mornings the dew showed white on the land and spider webs gleamed on the grass as if spun from ice. And in the mountain air was a faint sharpness that reminded Davis of Robin Hill, the sharp taste of fall.

And all this time there was among the officials of Wuchuan a dread uneasiness about the situation, *the Situation*. It was very grave. Everyone said so.

"I am surprised you do not prepare to leave," Mr. Tien told Davis one day in mid-August. "Every day it is getting worse."

"How is it getting worse?"

But Mr. Tien could not say exactly. There were strange faces on the streets, everyone was uneasy; but that was the most he could say. And that, thought Davis, was the most anyone could say because there was no situation, no *new* situation, just rumor piled on rumor, all emanating from the same small event, the Communist capture of Mashan in late July. Crump's Japanese Offensive proved just as abortive. The Japanese did move into a few isolated cities along the coast in early September, but then promptly went to sleep again. The winds that blew across East China carried no smell of burning, no taste of powder and bursting bombs, only that hint of coming fall.

In Wuchuan the little people, the farmers and the shopkeepers went about their work. There were tangerines in the market stalls; melons and tree strawberries and sugar cane and persimmons. Goods still poured in from Shanghai. In the camphor tree, the egrets preened their feathers, filled the air with their cries, and sailed off across the river to hunt for food in the brown rice fields;

and, everything considered, behaved more intelligently than the officials.

At the end of September, with the situation no graver than at the end of July, at last even the officials relaxed. Indeed, the pendulum swung the other way. The banks unpacked, and the wives of the military returned. Colonel Chao stated with considerable pride that General Chien's quick action in rushing reinforcements to the northern passes had frightened the enemy into complete impotence. Only Mr. Tien remained gloomy.

"It is just the lull before the storm," he said. "Some day everything will explode like a bomb."

Maguire was gloomy, too, but then Maguire was always gloomy.

As for Davis he was neither gloomy nor optimistic. He agreed with Mr. Tien that there was still a situation, that the Communists like an inch worm were building up their strength, arching their back, for another lunge southward. And he doubted if General Chien's ragged, half-starved soldiery with its inept leadership could stop them. Any change in the situation might also bring a reaction from the Japanese, a looting expedition, something of the sort. But there was no need to worry because there was nothing he could do about it. If the peace of the moment was only momentary, a sort of Indian Summer, why, then, he was grateful that the winter, the coming storm, had been postponed.

The cool autumn air was like a tonic. He felt boundlessly energetic and alive. Further, his work was going well. The Nanking agent was proving better than expected. Shanghai was back on the air, and Buttercup had unearthed a Korean informant who was feeding him news of Japan and Manchuria. Chungking was very pleased.

But the principal cause of his good spirits, and he would have admitted it if he had thought about it, was Nina. She gave him a sense of never having known before what it was like to love and be loved. It was true this happiness had its bitter moments. He disliked the clandestine nature of the affair, and yet he saw that it had to be so, even though he knew it was no secret. And there were odd moments when its impermanence stabbed at him. So did thought of Sarah, not his inconstancy but the deception. He hated that. And yet he knew it best as long as he must someday go back

to Robin Hill. And someday he knew he must. But these moments were rare; life at the Temple was too full, too demanding. Home and the future were things so remote that it was easy to put them aside and to forget.

As for any difficulty with Nina herself, they had differences of opinion, but none were important. They mostly concerned Maguire. Nina was quick and energetic; and the clerical work he gave her only took half her time. The rest of it she spent in energetically digging out information for him in the city. And in this she inevitably crossed Maguire.

When she found that General Mao at General Chien's headquarters was in control of intelligence activities, and that very little of it trickled through to Colonel Chao, she bribed a clerk in the General's office and produced a larger volume of information than Colonel Chao had ever given him.

When Maguire heard this, his first reaction was to put on his dark glasses, as if he suspected General Mao's minions would be after him at any moment.

"Sometimes it is necessary to use bribery," he said to Davis. "But Miss Lee is too foolhardy. She takes too many chances. Some day she will make a mistake. Then it will be too bad for all of us."

Davis knew that Maguire objected on other counts, that Nina's methods, her intrusion into what he regarded as his business, rangled far more than he admitted. And that bothered Davis because he could see Maguire was anxious not to criticize Nina; and he hated to see Nina given any special privilege for his sake.

And for this reason as well as to preserve Maguire's loyalty he did his best to curb her, and push her energy into other channels.

One of these channels was the study of Chinese. He asked her to teach him, and under her goading influence he was soon making rapid progress. Her influence went further than the language. He gave up his lonely meals, and ate with the staff. They got a new cook, a Northerner, who knew only Chinese dishes but was a master of the art. His toasted leaven bread, when spread with bean curd cheese dipped in pepper sauce, was, Davis thought, about the finest thing he had ever eaten.

He began seeing more of the Chinese in the city, and less of the Navy. He gave frequent dinners at the best restaurants, and even

patronized the Happy Congratulation Bath Club.

Even Maguire had to admit this was a salutary thing. "You give the officials quite a good impression," he said. "Much better than before." And this was high praise for Maguire.

The way Nina handled her work impressed Davis. She did a great deal, and yet gave no appearance of haste, of even being busy. Though he rarely found her working, if he asked how she was getting on with a particular job, he would find it done.

But there was a morning late in October when her grave and cheerful casualness broke down. She came bursting into his bedroom while he was exercising with his stone weights. He did not notice her till he heard her exclaim, "Oh, I'm sorry."

He lunged for a towel as she retreated to his office.

"What's the matter?"

"There's some very important news," she said. "I hope you can hurry."

She couldn't wait till he was fully dressed but came into the bedroom again while he was shaving and sat down on the edge of the bed. As she sat down, she picked up a pair of cotton shorts.

"Do you wear these in bed?" she asked. "Don't you have any pajamas?"

"No, no pajamas."

"I will make you some."

"Is that what you came to tell me?"

"No," she smiled, "don't be silly. Please finish your shaving. Then I will tell you."

"Is it so disturbing, you think I'll cut myself?"

"Yes, I think you will," she said seriously.

He turned back to the window to finish the job.

An October mist that paled the sun still obscured the valley. It was as if the sea had crept into East China overnight and now lapped at the very wall of the Temple court. There was an invigorating sharpness to the air, and drinking it in, Davis caught the vitality of the season.

"All clear," he said in a moment. "Now what is it?"

"Wait a minute," she replied. "Ching is just coming with the coffee."

When Ching was gone, he led her into the office. He watched

admiringly as she sat down with a swift grace in the chair next to the desk.

Her skin glowed with the tang of autumn, and her cheeks were wonderfully rosy, as red as the reddest persimmons in the market stalls; and in her dark eyes there seemed a brighter sparkle than ever. It was a delight just to look at her.

At the moment she seemed suddenly shy.

"Perhaps you won't like it," she said, eying him uncertainly. "I waited all night to tell you, and now I don't want to," she confessed with an embarrassed laugh, then took a deep breath. "Anyway, last night I talked to a Communist who wants to meet you. It is quite important."

"Yes?" said Davis, suddenly wary.

"You know this man. His name is Lin."

"The one who told us about Colonel Blakeslie?"

She gave her head a slight nod, her eyes still apprehensive.

Disturbing thoughts were running through his head. She must not get involved with Mr. Lin. Why should Mr. Lin go to her? That was no good. After all these months, with no mention, not even a whisper about her, or sign of suspicion from the Secret Police or anyone, he was sure now she was safe; but if she became involved again, it would be a different story. Or had she been involved all along? Oh, no! he thought, and brushed the suspicion aside.

"... I met him at Changhsing, you see. He was at the Communist headquarters," she was saying. "And yesterday he met Hsiao Lao-pan on the street, and asked to see me, so Hsiao Lao-pan brought him to my room. He was very nervous, always walking around and talking in a low voice. He asked me what about Commander Wu's plan to have some cooperation. So I said it was not possible before, but I would ask you again. Also he said to tell you, when the Communists come to this place, do not worry about it. Just stay here, and they will treat you very well."

She spoke off-handedly, but now as she looked up he could see that her gaze was inquiring as well as apprehensive, as if searching for his attitude before committing herself to one of her own.

"This is a very dangerous business," he said more severely than he had intended. "Even seeing Mr. Lin is dangerous. It's as dan-

gerous as working with the enemy."

"Please don't be angry," she said quickly. "I was only trying to help. Everything is dangerous. Going to Changhsing was dangerous." Her face grew sober, her voice low. "Loving you is dangerous. If there is no danger, there is no life."

He smiled faintly. "I don't mean to be angry. I just don't like Mr. Lin seeing you."

"Then you want me to tell him you are afraid to do anything, and please go away."

"No, I didn't say that." He paused. "You say he told you the Communists will come here?"

"He did not say it exactly. But that is his meaning."

He arose and began pacing the floor. "What do you think? Do you think we could have some connection and get away with it? How would we do it?"

"It would be quite easy. I could arrange a connection through Hsiao Lao-pan. He likes anything exciting, and he's perfectly trustworthy. Later we could arrange a radio schedule. I suggested this to Mr. Lin and he said it would be very simple to arrange."

"Did you tell him it would be impossible for me to stay here and work with them?"

"I told him I didn't think you could do it."

"Of course not. It would mean losing my whole system, agents, everybody. I'd have to begin all over again, and I'm sure the Communists, as good as their intelligence may be, wouldn't allow me any independence. At least General Chien does that, even if he doesn't want to." He paused, and stared at her a moment. "What do they want in return for giving me intelligence?"

"He didn't say. But I know what it is; radio equipment, medicine and guns—though they don't think you can get any guns."

He paused to stare at a house lizard at a corner of the side window. "It might mean losing you and Hsiao Lao-pan as well," he said as if to himself. "You both could be shot."

"I think the risk is worth it," she said.

"When are you going to see Mr. Lin again?"

"Tonight. So please tell me what to do."

He looked at his watch. "Let me think about it. I'll tell you later. After breakfast. No, after lunch."

She came to his office twice that afternoon, but each time saw someone in the room, and went away. The third time George was there, but Davis motioned her to come in and wait. George and his wife were giving the rest of the staff a dinner party that night, and he was apologizing because he would be late.

"It is too bad," said George. "It's because of XBM." XBM was the agent radio station just south of the Tai Lake where Colonel Blakeslie had lost his plane. "They want another schedule at six-thirty. They said it is very important."

"If it's Colonel Blakeslie again," said Nina. "I'll scream."

When George had gone, he turned to her. She was standing by the door, waiting impassively.

He eyed her critically. "That's the green dress you wore when I first saw you. It's very pretty." His eyes dropped. "Very pretty ankles."

A little sound of impatience broke from her lips. "Honestly," she said, exasperation struggling with a smile, "you are too silly."

"You want to know about Mr. Lin?"

"Yes, may I know about it?—please, thank you."

"The answer is *no*."

Her expression sobered. She walked to a chair opposite him and sat down. "Do you really want to say no?"

"It's too dangerous, Nina. Our work is going well enough. Why run a risk that might destroy everything?"

"But this morning you weren't so definite."

"Yes, I know. I was curious. I wanted to find out what Mr. Lin thought."

"You didn't say that," she said quickly. "Isn't it really you were trying to find out what I think, not Mr. Lin?"

"Yes, I suppose so." He felt his cheeks growing red.

"Why, why is it?" she blurted out. Then her voice dropped. "You don't trust me."

"Yes, I trust you. It's just that this work has made me suspicious, indirect. I keep looking for hidden meanings. I play the same game myself. I don't like it, but it's become a habit. It has nothing to do with you as a person." But even as he tried to explain, he wondered why he had not been more direct. It wasn't that he didn't

trust her. No, of course, he trusted her; he knew he trusted her.

"How stupid," she replied. She stood up, her breath coming quickly. "How can you love me if you treat me like a spy?" Her voice trembled. "You really are stupid!" And with a quick swing, she ran to the door.

"Nina! Wait a minute!"

She turned. There were angry tears in her eyes.

"Please believe me. I don't distrust you. This has nothing to do with loving you."

Seeing the agitation in his face, she made an effort to brush away her tears and calm herself. "It's all right," she said at last, "I'm sorry." Then she turned, and the door closed behind her.

He stared after her moodily. Why was it necessary to suppose she was anything but what she said she was? She had been to the Communist area, and they had impressed her. This suspicion was just what came of this job, this way of thinking.

He didn't see Nina again till that evening at George's dinner party in the ABC Café. It was a new restaurant, and very distinguished. The name, for instance—that was the height of elegance. Something foreign. It was sure to attract the best people, and it did. That evening it was fairly overflowing with military officers, Shanghai merchants and government officials. It was well situated, too; on the Motor Road just outside the West Gate. George had reserved a special second floor room, hidden behind a blue silk curtain. It had a wide window that ran the width of the front wall and permitted a fine view of the street below.

Davis examined the room with amused approval. There were a number of calendar nudes on the wall. There was also a picture of a railway train, bright and shiny, moving through a moonlit valley at high speed.

Mrs. George Huang, Miss Chen, Nina and Nielsen were sitting at one of the two tables, eating roasted sunflower seeds and drinking tea.

Mrs. Huang, acting the host in George's absence, rose as he entered and waved him to a seat. He bowed to the assembled company. "Good evening. Good evening." Though he gave Nina no

more of a glance than the others, it was anxious and apologetic. She smiled back, her eyes warm, and he was sure he had been forgiven.

"Where's your boss?" he asked Nielsen.

"He's making out forms. There have to be ten—deciplicate, whatever you say. The Navy never takes a chance—best red tape in the world."

"In China we have more red tape than you," said Nina, "and it has a nice smell—it's aromatic."

"It may be just as hopeless, like the country, but you can't have more."

"China isn't hopeless," Nina began, but Davis interrupted.

"You haven't more red tape than the Army," he said to Nielsen. "If you put one man in the field you need three men at an advanced depot to supply him, and by the time you work back to Kunming you have two hundred men under a full colonel. That's the theory of supply, it's a reverse pyramid and the thing that holds it together is red tape."

"Seriously," said Nina, who had been waving a hand in an effort to stop him. "Seriously," and she turned to Nielsen, "do you really think China is hopeless? On the radio and in the newspaper people always say the situation in China is serious but not hopeless. Don't you think it is true?"

"They're confused," said Nielsen. "It's the other way. The situation is hopeless but not serious."

Davis started to laugh but choked on a mouthful of tea. "That's a very profound remark," he said at last. "Nina, you should concentrate on that."

"It's because the people are all right," she reflected, drawing out Nielsen's observation. "No matter what happens, how hopeless it is, the people can suffer it. They just start over again. In America if your people had to suffer what Chinese suffer, they would simply fall over and just die. But in China if a man gets sick, and his wife and children die from starvation, and his house is burned by some soldiers, then he just smiles. And after awhile his pain is better and he makes a new house and gets a new wife and children. That's why it is so hopeless. If he would just get angry about all his troubles, then he wouldn't suffer so much."

They were not to wait beyond seven for George and Maguire, and so when seven came they sat down at the other table, all in a good humor. And with the appearance of wine, their good humor grew into hilarity, everyone laughing, frequently at nothing at all.

There was an unreserved quality about the laughter of the three young women that Davis could not describe, but found particularly pleasing. It suited the occasion, the room with its incongruous pictures, it suited the world—the world of the moment. Now that the day was dying, the blue sky growing dark and lights twinkling through shadows in the square below, the never ending stream of people, the mechanics rhythmically pounding on a truck fender across the road, all became part of the gaiety. Chinese cities could be gay enough by day, but at night they could be magical. And the cool clean air of October seemed to brighten the magic. Night hid the dirt and strain in shadows, seemed to hide all the smells but those of cakes cooking in deep fat, of incense and tea, and pine oil and aromatic paper, and with a thousand colored lights lit the fruit stalls, the tobacco and firecracker shops, the noisy restaurants, each wide open to the street, set them all agleam like so many Christmas trees. By leaning back in his chair, he could see through the tunnel of the West Gate into the city, and the opening at the far end was glowing with the lights beyond, the opening itself another Christmas tree.

It was odd to think that only thirty miles away there were men, thousands of them, who would shoot him on sight. It had no reality at all.

He turned back to the table, as Miss Chen thrust a cup of wine under his nose and demanded he drink. He had never seen Miss Chen quite so gay.

Just then Maguire and George Huang burst into the room. George was excited and Maguire was nervous; both had a furtive seriousness in their faces. Without looking to right or left, Maguire pulled a chair close to Davis, took off his dark glasses and sat down. "And smiling, the boy fell dead," said Davis, laughing in spite of an effort not to, for the sobriety of the new arrivals seemed ludicrous in contrast to the gaiety of the moment.

"*Kan-pei!*" said Miss Chen, "Drink a cup!" And she raised a glass to the newcomers. But Maguire, who was searching through

some papers, glanced at her coldly, as if she were no more than a picture on the wall. "*Kan-pei!*" she said again, but in a small, uncertain voice, then put the glass down, suddenly embarrassed. There was something pitiful in the spectacle, and Davis was outraged.

"Don't be damned rude," he said, frowning and smiling at once.

But Maguire ignored him. "This is very important," he said and handed Davis a radio message.

George, unable to contain himself, turned to the crowd:

"Everybody's coming," he fairly shouted. "The Japanese and the Communists! They're only about forty miles away! Gee whiz!"

"Fine," said Nielsen, and put his head out the curtain. "*Tsa-fang!*—more wine!"

Nina giggled.

Davis held the message to the light, his face still full of amusement. It was in Chinese with Maguire's translation scribbled between the characters. He couldn't seem to puzzle it out.

Then Maguire showed him the vertical order of the words.

"This morning," he read painfully, "according to General Chang and the Tai Li Intelligence, Thirty Thousand Communist bandits started an attack near Tipu which was captured this afternoon. They are still going south. Another group of ten thousand attacked Siaofeng. Everyone says they will go to Wuchuan, maybe to Pinghsien. They want to cut off the Government troops from Shanghai area. This is their diabolical plan. Japanese troop movements just east very numerous. Some people say maybe they will do something also. More later."

By the time he had read this twice, the party had sobered a little; but all the same he found it difficult to take the message seriously.

"Well," he said at last, smiling round the room. "I suppose we ought to find out what this is all about. I can go and see the military, and, George, you better come with me. Maguire, I suppose you better see the Party people? And Nina, would you look up Mr. Wu? Then we'll meet at the Temple for coffee and ice cream. How's that?"

He was still smiling, still caught in the illusion of gaiety, a feel-

ing that the room, Maguire, this message were part of play that could only be laughed at—nothing more.

He had hardly finished speaking when the building shook violently with a deep, thundering explosion. Nielsen jumped to his feet with an exclamation. One of the ladies shrieked. A confused sound of shouting broke from the other rooms and the street below. Feet pounded in a panic on the stairs. One voice from the street, louder than the rest, rose in a screaming babble of excited words.

Davis had started, his hands gripping at the table.

Then George laughed. "It's just the stove in the restaurant next to this place. It exploded."

Davis shook his head. He could see steam pouring from the building, and a gathering crowd. Then, as if by previous arrangement, the panic died as quickly as it had arisen. He could feel a dampness on his hands and noticed that the knuckles showed white. He released them slowly and sat back, but something still pounded in his brain.

The explosion, he thought; it was almost as if it had been inside him, shooting out icy bursts of fear. He felt weak. One test, he thought with chagrin, one bursting bomb, and his nerves snapped like a piece of string.

From somewhere in him, he could feel the old uncertainty and worries, the nervous strain he had thought dead and buried, resurging with a vengeance. All these people, even Nina, the room, the colored lights, seemed suddenly faded. The war was back. Ahead lay confusion and in it something disastrous.

He shook his head uncertainly. It was silly, and yet . . . at least the Indian Summer was done, that was certain. Ahead lay the winter, Mr. Tien's storm.

CHAPTER XIV

Chaos in Wuchuan

AT THE home of General Mao—neither General Chien nor Colonel Chao were in the city—Davis and George were ushered into a small cluttered room, lit by two huge red candles that threw enormous shadows on the high walls. General Mao, who was smoking and sipping tea with two friends, received them without any show of surprise and with a graceful little gesture motioned them to be seated.

Davis gave him the message, and the General read it to his friends, who nodded vaguely without any outward show of interest, their half-closed eyes fixed on Davis. Behind them in unison their huge shadows bobbed up and down on the wall. There was something unpleasant in the aspect, unpleasant and even sinister.

"It is nothing to worry about," said General Mao, handing the message back. He had crossed one leg over the other and was swinging his foot, the strong muscles in his smooth cheeks expanding and contracting in the same rhythm.

"You don't believe this then? You have no news about this attack?"

"It is exaggerated," said General Mao. "There are some rumors, yes. But it is nothing. The Government has too many troops north of Wuchuan."

When Davis and George departed, the other accompanied them to the door. A servant held a flickering candle. The General, his face suddenly remote, bowed once and was gone.

As the light vanished, the night closed in. The street was little more than an alley, dark and deserted; and in that silent darkness, there seemed something sinister. Davis shook himself, buttoned his field jacket and walked quickly toward Tien Mu Ta Lu. He might have foreseen that General Mao would tell him nothing.

Once in Tien Mu Ta Lu the furtive quality of the night disappeared. It was still filled with noisy, jostling crowds, their breath

faintly steamy in the frosty air. A man brushed his arm, peered at him, and announced loudly, "Ai, a foreigner!" Another strolled by singing an operatic air, his eyes on the sky, his hands gesturing the role he sang. A small knot of people had gathered in front of a tin-smith shop to watch a quarrel. Another crowd, mostly children, were gathered about a vendor who was blowing candy animals out of sugar syrup. Nearby sat an old fortune teller, eating at a tangerine and watching the candy vendor with sad, tired eyes, as if he saw he had learned the wrong trade but was now too old to change.

This was the end of the day in everyday China, he observed. There was no alarm here, no sense of impending trouble, no hurrying anxiety, no frightened faces.

A stocky man in a black overcoat jostled him, and he stopped in his tracks. For a moment he struggled with the desire to turn around, then moved on.

"What is the trouble?" George asked.

"Nothing," he smiled. "I was thinking of something. It's nothing."

It was curious seeing Mr. Lin—he had forgotten him; it was curious making this secretive effort to discover if the Communists were attacking in the north when here was one of them.

At the Temple Maguire confirmed the news. So did Nina. It was not believed that either Tipu or Siaofeng had fallen, but both were under attack. And so it was decided that though it would be necessary to pack, to prepare to evacuate, nothing had to be done till the morning.

Nina was the last to leave. When the others had gone, she came back into his office.

"You saw Mr. Lin?" he asked.

She nodded. "He just has the same news." She came close to the desk, studying him soberly. "Will you be angry at me?"

"Angry?" His eyes grew faintly suspicious. "Why?"

"Seeing Mr. Lin tonight."

He drew back, still suspicious but also amused.

"What have you done now?"

"I was very nice to Mr. Lin. I just told him when the Commu-

nists come, we might leave some things for them, just by accident so to speak. Then later on if there is no risk, we might have some cooperation." She had been watching him carefully, but now she moved to the door. "Only, I don't want to bother you tonight. You look tired, Davis. You better go to bed, and not work anymore."

"One minute," he said. "What do you mean by 'leaving them some things?' What sort of things?"

She smiled a little uneasily. "Oh, just anything. Some things you don't need. You have two portable radios, and there is some medicine you don't need. Also Mr. Lin said he would like some ammunition. But we can arrange it in the morning."

"We can arrange it right now," he laughed. "You can simply tell Mr. Lin that our supplies are very short, and we are sorry but we cannot help him. Or we can just ignore the proposal, if you like."

She turned, and her manner became pleading. "Davis, please don't be angry."

"I'm not angry. Observe." And he smiled as pleasantly as he could. "But, Nina, we can't do anything like that. I can't spare the equipment, I haven't the authority and it's too risky." She started to interrupt but he held up a hand. "I know you are trying to help, and I know the temptation. But we just can't do it."

"Davis, please. Just listen one minute. I know you don't like me interfering like this, and I have no right to. But I feel so strongly about it. I am Chinese, you are a foreigner, so you cannot understand my feeling. But I promise you, I can understand yours. I know it will hurt your work if the Government people find out, but how can they possibly? Even if they suspect you, they can never prove it is not an accident. And why do you think only about the office? You just cheat yourself. Why don't you think what is good for China and America, now and in the future? What is the use of fighting just for the sake of knocking down the enemy?" She had been speaking in a rush, and paused for breath. He was watching her intently, his eyes at once interested, warm, critical. "I don't know about Communism. I don't know the philosophy and the ideas of it. I only know what I see, and in Changhsing I saw the soldiers have red faces and their bodies are fat. In this place I see the soldiers are too thin and their faces are gray as if already they were dead. That's why I feel we ought to help these people."

She paused as if expecting a reply, but he merely nodded.

"The Government," she went on, "and the Kuomintang and men like General Mao, they are like the Japanese. They don't care about the Chinese people. You know the Japanese killed my mother and father. And I can tell you, if the Kuomintang heard me talk like this, they would kill me also. It is just the same."

He had risen and was pacing the floor. "I know, Nina, but at the moment that is not the point."

"Yes, it is the point," she broke in with spirit, her lips parted. "You are not stupid. You don't have to be a machine, with somebody else driving you. You can be your own driver."

"No, no," he objected. "You don't understand. The point is this equipment. It's all marked. I need it. In fact I need more than I have."

"Yes, that is what you think. But also *you* don't understand. What I mean is, it is more important to give these people something rather than to use the equipment for anything else."

He threw up his hands. "Oh, well," he said, "then it's another question. And I still don't agree with you. I like your feeling. I feel the same way, but I still disagree. In the first place, no one seems to consider that before you settle your internal problems, you have to get rid of the Japanese; in this area, anyway, both the Kuomintang and the Communists have forgotten that. They are certain the Americans will destroy Japan; and I suppose they're right. But I'll be damned if I'll give them, either of them, any equipment to use against each other."

"And another point," he added quickly. "What makes you think I can stop being a machine? Can one little cog on a wheel start going one way while all the other little cogs go the other way? I'd simply be court-martialed and sent home, and that would be the end of it."

She had been listening impatiently, and now she came up to him, stopped his pacing, sat him down, and gazed at him warmly as at a child.

"Davis, you are so worried about these things. You only look at the negative side, at all the dangers, and troubles. If I thought you would be sent home, or these gifts would only be for Chinese fighting Chinese, do you think I would suggest it? I'm almost twenty-

four. That's old enough to be intelligent."

"I suppose so," he smiled. "But you keep thinking with your heart and not your head." He drew in his breath. "Nina, we just can't get involved. I wish you wouldn't press me."

"I don't like to press you. But don't you see, if we give these people some sign we respect them, then later, if they capture all this area, then it will be good for your work to have some connection, not bad for it. Is that so emotional and not intelligent?" He merely smiled and shook his head.

She had sat down on the arm of his chair, and now she slipped to his lap. A faint fragrance reached him. He put a hand about her shoulder, and she nestled close, her breath stirring unevenly. Then remembering where he was, he pushed her erect and stood her gently on her feet.

She stared down at him with quiet gravity.

"I wish I wasn't so stubborn," he said gently. "But I am, so let's not argue any more."

"Yes, I suppose so," she said absently. Then in a moment, "I love you too much. I'm too weak."

And turning slowly, she walked to the doorway. "Good night," she said, a listless quality in her voice and gently closed the door.

"Can I see you home?" he called after her, his tone anxious, even apologetic.

"No, thank you," she said, her voice indifferent. "Hsiao Lao-pan is here. He can take care of me."

He watched the two figures, the smaller carrying a lantern, as they moved to the end of the Temple and disappeared beyond it. For a moment their jogging shadows grew large in the lantern light, then diminished, fell away and vanished altogether.

The dawn was well advanced when he awoke. It was cold and gray and there was a wind from the north. He knew it was from the north because he could hear it whistling in the top branches of the pine tree, though the air in the court below was still. He lay quiet a moment, thinking over the events of the day before. And as in the past, he listened idly to the sounds of the city. There was the usual murmur. It seemed unchanged, and yet added to it was a squeaking sound like the high singing of frogs in country ponds

in the spring. It couldn't be the squealing of pigs, he thought; it had a more continuous pulsing quality.

He got out of bed, put on some clothes and walked out to the wall.

"Ching," he called, seeing his hot water being delivered. "Ching, what's that noise?"

Ching put down his burden, and hurried toward him. "Ching," he said again, "what's that noise?"

"Which noise?" asked Ching.

"That squeaking. Can't you hear it? That squeak, squeak sound."

"Oh," said Shing. "Just belong—what you call—*hsiao-che-tze*." He made a gesture as of pushing a wheelbarrow. Then he pointed across the river. "See, many people take things to the river. Maybe Japs come."

Now that it was pointed out, he could see well enough. There were hundreds of little figures moving down to the river, their goods on their backs or piled on wheelbarrows. This was more convincing than all the reports from the remote world beyond the mountains. It was something tangible. Then his gaze came to rest on the camphor tree. He had not noticed before. The egrets—they, too, were gone.

"When Mr. Hsiung comes, I want to see him right away," he told Ching and retreated to the Temple where he began dragging out his own effects and stuffing them into barracks bags and a camphor chest. Now if their two boats were safe, if there was no panic . . . Maguire would have to check right away.

When Maguire came at last, he seemed no more nervous than usual, even a little resigned. He seemed to be thinking, "You see? I told you how it would be."

"How are the junks?" Davis asked. "I think we ought to put guards on them."

Maguire nodded. "It is all arranged. The Military Police will put two *hsien-ping* on each one, but we must also put some notices. So please may I borrow your chop."

Davis gave the Chinese his official seal. "Any more news?"

"No, but I hear Tipu is fallen. Nobody knows about Siaofeng. But that is just rumor from people on the street. From now on we can just get rumors."

"How much time do you think we have?"

"Maybe two days. Maybe ten days. How can you say? Anyway, at least two days." He led Davis to the court and pointed up the valley to a small red gash in the foothills that marked the mountain road to the northeast. Down it, in single file, wound an endless stream of soldiers. "Those men are moving south. They belong to the Sixth Regiment, Colonel Ho's men. There is a story that the Fifth Regiment is annihilated between Siaofeng and Tipu. Not so much by fighting; they just go over to the Communist side. And so the Sixth is retreating. But the Military here say it is just changing position. They say everybody should be calm; the situation is quite safe. Of course, they have to say this. So really nothing is reliable. Anyway, everybody is moving, also the Military."

"What about the Japanese? Any sign of life?"

"Also just rumors. I hear about a thousand Japanese come to Lihuang, but maybe it is just to increase the garrison."

Lihuang was fifty miles to the southeast.

Davis nodded, then stood up. "I suppose we ought to expect the worst. At least get the boats packed."

"It is better," said Maguire.

Davis started for the door but the other stopped him. "There is something quite secret. Can we talk at the Pavilion?"

Maguire's thin face had grown expressionless.

Davis nodded and led the way. It was cold in the Pavilion, each breath of air sending a chill through him, so that he danced from one foot to the other, his hands in his pockets.

"It is just this," said Maguire, "I am nervous about Miss Lee. You see, she has been saying something about the Communists which has a strange sound. It is more than just sympathy. This morning I stop at her place, but she is gone. Then I saw an old letter she had received from Shanghai. It was not a good thing to do, but it was open and I read it. It was dated last June. It talked about goods being shipped from Suchowfu, north of the Yangtse River, to Wuchuan. Why does she get a letter about business like this? But if you change the word goods for *Hsien-fei*, then the meaning is much better. That is why I say perhaps Miss Lee is not just feeling sympathy for those people. Perhaps she is one of them. Perhaps even before she came here."

It was Davis whose face was now expressionless. Maguire had spoken hesitatingly, and now he glanced uneasily at Davis; but as Davis said nothing, he went on with more confidence.

"Another thing," he said. "Last night I was talking to Miss Chen when Miss Lee came back, and she was unhappy. She told me about Mr. Lin and the idea to leave some things for those people." He looked hard at Davis. "It is very dangerous to do this."

Davis nodded absently. "Yes, I know. I'm all against it." Then he turned to Maguire. He had to say something. "The only thing is to be careful and watchful. You are probably entirely wrong, you know. Also please let me handle this. Don't you worry about it."

Maguire shrugged his shoulders. "I don't want to make any trouble. But, Captain, sometimes you may be too easy about people. Also I like to have a good idea about this girl. But if you trust her more than me, I can only tell you I must resign. Perhaps everyone will resign," he added darkly. He had grown suddenly emotional, blurting out his words with an accumulation of bitterness. "Some people say you just trust this girl, nobody else. And I often see you do not act the same as before. So if you just trust her, it is not safe for me or Miss Chen or anybody."

For a moment Davis could think of nothing to say. Though he could not admit it, Maguire's mention of the letter coming on top of his own faint suspicion at Nina's Communist connections had been more than shattering; it was like a dash of ice cold water. And now this emotional outburst—he felt everything slipping, a sense of disintegration and dissolution as inexorable as that overtaking Wuchuan.

"Maguire," he said, his voice strained, "if I should lose you everything would go to pieces. I know that. Nina has been very useful, but she can never take your place as far as the work goes. And I'm sure she doesn't want to, I'm sure she is just trying to help, though she may make mistakes. But I can't lose you. I'll do anything to keep you. Please don't worry. I'll see that something is done about it."

In the desperation of the moment Davis' manner, his voice, were almost slavish. This embarrassed Maguire, and he started edging nervously toward the Temple. "I hope it is true," he mumbled, then

held up the seal. "I must arrange about the boats." And turning, he retreated hurriedly toward his office. He knew the problem was a personal one, and though he was relieved, he was also unhappy about it. He had not expected Davis to react so desperately.

But in Davis the desperation did not last long. He felt suddenly resentful, toward Maguire, toward Nina, toward China, toward the world. Why did he have to get caught in this thing? Why couldn't people be simple and uncomplicated like Miss Chen? What right did Maguire have to read Nina's mail? He should have jumped Maguire for that.

It was a miserable day. For all his promise he said nothing to Nina; he did not know what to say, and he was too busy. Plans, he decided that afternoon, were only good as far as they could be made to fit unpredictable and unforeseeable difficulties. In the end he could see that he would be scrabbling along, little better off than the opportunists who had made no plans in the first place.

He needed money, and spent most of the day getting it because the banks were closed. Some had even gone. As Nielsen observed: "They always leave first—just behind the Military." There was also difficulty in getting coolies to load the junks, so he spent what was left of the day driving the jeep back and forth between the Temple and the junks, and without the trailer, which had never been returned since Major Crump had taken it, the end of the afternoon came and only one of the little boats was loaded.

Twice soldiers tried to commandeer the junks, and the *hsien-ping* were hard put to hold them off. Once, one of them fired a pistol in the air and by pure chance hit the roof of the Temple. It made such a clattering crash that the servants were terrified and immediately departed for the river, announcing excitedly that the Japanese were fighting in the hills above the city. Most of the people supposed it was the Japanese, not the Communists, who were coming. And for a while the boatmen, excited by the story, were all for casting off their lines and leaving at once. It was a fine example of the way panic bred panic, Davis thought. There was a fire in the city that night, and for a moment Davis thought it was the Navy Hostel. The red glow and the angry flames licking high into the night sky were in that direction. But Nielsen appeared a short

time later in search of news, and reported it was a wine shop further up the street. The owner had fled and some drunken soldiers, bursting into the place, had accidentally set it on fire. But because of the fire, a lot of people were running out into the country without any idea where they were going, just running.

"It's like a Fourth of July back home," Nielsen said. "You ought to see our street. And you ought to see Phil. He's going crazy. Some of our people just told him the road's going to be cut tomorrow, and he's got ten tons of explosives in the cellar."

He shook his head in faint amusement, but Davis jumped. "Cut the road? They're not going to cut it yet. It's impossible."

But he knew well enough that anything was possible. He had forgotten about the road.

George brought his wife and children to the Temple that night and two of the servants brought theirs as well. And these strangers wandering about the court with a lost, helpless look on their faces, lit up by the flaring light of the distant fire, added to the sense of dissolution and chaos.

Maguire came in that evening at eleven. He was very nervous. He had heard the story of soldiers setting fire to the wine shop, but he thought it was not true. He believed it the work of enemy agents. They wanted to terrorize the people into leaving the city without their goods; it would make Wuchuan a richer prize for loot.

"I don't mean the Communists, I mean the Japanese," he said excitedly. His eyes were shining and he was out of breath. He had talked to a Customs' official who had talked to a merchant who had seen a column of Japanese leaving Lihuang the morning before in the direction of Wuchuan. Maguire thought they should pack all night, and leave in the early morning as Lihuang was only fifty miles away.

But that was impossible, Davis knew. There was martial law and no one was allowed near the bridge. The fuel line of the jeep was clogged up, and anyway he had no time to drive it.

He worked over the jeep long past midnight, and with the distant fire still casting a pink glow over the city, with the servants talking excitedly in the kitchen quarters behind the new stone wall, the sense of war and chaos became fixed in his mind. He began to

look back on the long months of quiet that had ended only a day before as another era, already receded far into the past.

Nina awoke him at six. She was as excited as Maguire had been the night before. She had been stopped in the village by one of the junk masters, and he told her that the other junk had gone. Some army officers had come aboard and persuaded the ship to leave. The boatmen on the vanished junk were a poor lot, the remaining junk master said; they had no courage, their "livers were small." The *Hsien-ping* had also left; they had lost face and were afraid of the anger of the Captain with the blue eyes.

Nina seemed more excited by this new disaster than dismayed. Her naturally red cheeks were flushed and her eyes shone with a luminous lustre.

"You seem to enjoy all this," he remarked dryly, trying to shake the sleep out of his head. As usual, he thought, Maguire had been right.

"I know I ought to be more worried," she smiled. "But it just excites me. I can't help it. But anyway, we can find something."

He dressed nervously. This was one problem that had to be attacked right away; and as soon as Maguire appeared, he was sent off to see what might be done.

The compound that morning was a scene of confusion reminiscent of the city. There were boxes and odds and ends of equipment piled everywhere, people moving aimlessly about among them. It was Nina's job, working with Ching, to see that all the boxes were marked, listed and sent to the river. She alone gave an impression of efficiency. She sat on a crate near the driveway, checking and marking everything as it left the compound. She had borrowed a number of coolies from Mr. Wu, and though they had no boat to put the boxes in they were being piled hopefully on the river bank by the bridge.

Midway through the morning several people raised their heads and said, "*Ching-pao!*" Davis who was cleaning up some messages in his office looked up sharply, then walked out to the courtyard wall. Very faintly he could hear the furious clanging of a bell. That was the first *ching-pao*, the first air raid alarm, he had heard since early September. It was curious; there seemed a conspiracy to

throw in all the atmosphere of war that could be mustered. Not that it mattered; no one paid any attention to air alarms any more.

Coming back from the wall, he passed Nina, who was counting out numbers to Ching. She bent over and touched him.

"Don't be so nervous. Everything will be all right," she smiled. "Just because there is a war, it's not your fault."

"I know, I know," he said absently, then peered at the box she sat on and several near her. "Those are the big radio. I wonder—perhaps we ought to unload some stuff from the junk and put those on."

"Don't worry," she said again. "We'll get another junk. That's too much trouble, changing things around."

"No, I think we should. That's our most important equipment. George is having a terrible time with the portable. On a bad day he won't get through." Then he turned with an exclamation. "That's the third, the fourth."

Two rifle shots had burst noisily from the valley below them, the bullets whining off into the hills. He turned to Nina and waved his arms. "Just for no reason, all of a sudden people start shooting, banging air raid alarms, running around in circles. . . . You see what happens." He shook his head, and started toward his office. But at the sound of the telephone, he turned to the other end of the Temple.

It was Mr. Wu. "I hear Colonel Chao is still here, and he may have an extra truck," said Mr. Wu's precise voice. "It is lucky I get you because the line will be cut by twelve. Also—"

"*Ching-pao! Ching-pao!*" a loud voice cut in, as if only waiting for Mr. Wu to say the service would be cut; and the line went dead. He waited a moment, then walked out to the court.

"If Mr. Hsiung comes in, tell him I've gone to see Colonel Chao," he called to Nina. "The Colonel may have a truck." And collecting his pistol, he turned hurriedly down the drive.

Halfway down he met Maguire coming up. "Any luck?" he called.

Maguire shook his head. "Not even one small sampan."

"Then you will have to take the junk and leave this afternoon," said Davis. "Nothing else to do. You can take everybody except George and Ching. I want to keep the radio going as long as pos-

sible. We'll come tomorrow by jeep, bring what we can, unless we find something in the meantime. I'm going to see Colonel Chao. He may have a truck."

"But you can't go now. There is a *ching-pao*."

Davis looked puzzled.

"Yes, truly," said Maguire. "It is not the same as before. Now there are soldiers everywhere. No one can move. If you move they will shoot you. Just now a soldier was shooting at me from the bridge."

"We'll see," said Davis, and walked off down the hill in spite of the other's protests.

At the bottom of the drive, he paused and looked about him. He could see no soldiers anywhere. There were two farmers sitting by the side of the road. As his gaze met theirs, they motioned him to get down, but he paid them no attention. Just then, however, as if instinctively aware of his presence, a soldier rose up from behind the stone railing of the bridge, and seeing him, at once waved him back. He hesitated an instant, then returned the gesture and walked on. Immediately, the soldier raised his gun and fired. He could hear the bullet sing overhead, then thud into the hillside behind him. He crouched a little at the sound but walked on, quickening his pace, and in a moment the bridge was lost to view behind the first houses of the village. But the shot brought two other soldiers from the shadows of a tea shop. They waved their guns at him menacingly and motioned him off the empty street. In turn he drew the pistol buckled to his side, and without decreasing his pace, waved them back into the tea shop while flourishing the weapon in the air. The gesture had little meaning but accomplished its purpose; the two soldiers lowered their rifles uncertainly, and their momentary confusion allowed him time to approach them.

"You don't understand," he said as he came close. "I must go to the Military Headquarters."

There were two other soldiers in the tea shop; one, apparently a sergeant in charge of the detail, shook his head. "Not possible," he muttered, eying Davis coolly. "There is a *ching-pao*. No one is allowed on the street."

"I am also a soldier. I have urgent business," said Davis and showed his Chinese military passport decorated with the great seal

of the Generalissimo.

But the soldier merely raised his hands. "If someone shoots you, then you will be dead," he commented. "And if you are dead, your journey is no longer important."

"But why shoot me. Why not let people move around. It's ridiculous. Who cares about a *ching-pao*."

"I don't know about that but I know someone might shoot you. Perhaps they will think you are Japanese. How do they know?"

The others laughed. The sergeant was evidently a wit.

"They are not ordinary people," said Davis with flattery. "They will know better than that."

The other smiled and there was a twinkle in his eye. At last he stood up. "You are a foreigner. You cannot understand our customs, of course. So I will send one man. He is worthless, but his voice is good."

With his lone escort Davis moved on to the bridge. He soon saw the sergeant's meaning. Though a dwarf of a man, the soldier had a voice that shook the air. At the sight of any sentry ahead, he bawled out something which invariably froze the man into attention.

The junk was at its mooring below the bridge, he noticed; and there was the pile of boxes waiting on the bank, Lao Wang, the coolie, guarding them. He was dressed in an old field jacket with a Chinese army cap on his head and a tommy gun across his lap. Maguire's idea, and good enough, Davis thought, as long as no one challenged the coolie. Then, gun or no gun, no one would run faster than old Lao Wang.

The city was silent as a tomb. It was not just the strict enforcement of the air raid precautions. Shop after shop was boarded up, the occupants gone.

As they turned the corner of Tien Mu Ta Lu to General Chien's Headquarters, there was Colonel Chao, pacing up and down in front of a battered charcoal burner that in no country but China could have possibly survived. Several soldiers were busy piling goods inside it while two grimy mechanics were poking ashes from the burner. At the gate of the Headquarters, now locked and barred, Mrs. Chao and two children waited, staring blankly at the operation. The Colonel, pacing nervously back and forth, was is-

suings orders in his high excited voice; but no one was paying him the slightest attention.

He greeted Davis with the peculiar enthusiasm moments of crisis can generate.

"Ah, Captain, Captain," he fairly shouted, smiling all over and seizing Davis' hand with both his own. "So, Captain Russell. Well, Captain." And for some time that was the most he could say. But at last he bent forward with a confidential air. "It is very danger for Wuchuan. I think you must leave this place. Captain, I tell you everything is very danger for you."

"I would like to leave, but I need a truck, a truck or a boat."

"No, no. It is not necessary," said the Colonel, incomprehensively. "You see, two days before I go to Pilou where General Chien move his headquarters so he can direct the fighting more directly. Then I come back yesterday with the truck to get my family. Now everybody is gone. Even Colonel Ho. He has a new headquarters at some country place. If the Communist come, he can defeat it easily."

"What soldiers are these in the street?"

The Colonel smiled his secretive but meaningless smile. "I don't know. I don't know about it."

"Is the road open?"

"Yes, it is still open. I only just came from Pilou."

"Do you know anything about the Japanese? I heard they are advancing from Lihuang."

The Colonel's jaw dropped, and his eyes opened wide. "Is it true?" he asked in an agonized whisper.

"I don't know. I thought you might know."

The Colonel relaxed. "Perhaps it is not true." He grew confidential again. "But I tell you, those people are too bad, those Communists. You can never think how bad it is." And his face screwed up into a most extraordinary look of revulsion. "Even they will get the Japanese to help them to attack the patriotic soldiers."

But Davis was not interested in the villainy of "those people."

"Colonel," he said, "one of my boats was stolen by some soldiers. And I can't leave unless I get some other transportation. Mr. Wu Yin told me you might have an extra truck."

"No, no," said Colonel Chao, excited again. "I do not have anything. Just this one car. But I will tell General Chien right away and he will send someone to help you."

"What will he send?"

"He will send a boat."

"Why not telephone?"

The other smiled wisely. "The telephone is cut. It is taken off."

"Could you telephone from Shih-tze Ho?"

"Yes, yes. Very good. I will telephone from the ferry, from Shih-tze Ho. I will do it." His manner became heroic, even defiant, as if the task involved grave risk. "Certainly, I will do it. Captain, it is my *duty* to do it."

He broke off suddenly, bent his head and began waving his hands.

Davis listened. Faint despite the stillness of the city, he could hear a humming sound like that of insects on a summer day.

"Ai," said one of the mechanics, "*huei-chi lai-le!* A plane comes!"

"Quick," said the Colonel, and with a shout to the others he dived under the truck. The woman, children and the soldiers followed, but the mechanics went on with their tinkering. Davis compromised with the Colonel's insistence by twisting himself only half under and turned on his side so he could scan the eastern sky. There was a high gray overcast and in a moment he spotted the plane, a small Japanese reconnaissance ship, black against the clouds, moving in slowly at about six thousand feet. There, he thought, was Major Crump's offensive. He reported the nature of the plane to the Colonel, and the latter stuck his head out.

"Sometimes it will drop a bomb. It may be a trick," he said dubiously.

But the Colonel's doubt could not prevent Davis from climbing out and assuming a more comfortable position, his back to the rear wheel. He looked at his watch and lit a cigarette. With a plane in the sky he could only wait.

"It might drop a bomb on the road or the ferry to break it so we cannot use it for escaping," the Colonel continued. His voice issuing from under the truck had a curious, sepulchral sound.

But Davis was not listening. He had relaxed, and having relaxed *

was viewing the situation with detachment. It was enough to make one laugh aloud, he thought. Not just the Colonel and his air raid shelter, but the air raid and the Americans and the Chinese, the whole confused situation. The one relieving side of war was its comedy. But for that any man might break under the strain.

CHAPTER XV

Something in a Dream

THE "all clear" sounded at exactly noon, and though people moved again on the city streets, they were few, and they scurried along, even as he, casting furtive glances at him, as if they were one and all bound on errands that had to be kept secret at all cost.

As he entered Ta Shih Tze, he noticed a stocky figure moving in the shadows of boarded shops, followed by a guard with a drawn pistol. He increased his pace till he was within hailing distance.

"Mr. Tien, wait a minute!"

The man turned, shrinking back into an area way, as if hiding from pursuers.

"Come in here," said Mr. Tien in a hoarse whisper as he drew close, and pulled Davis behind a stone pillar of the Farmers' Bank.

"The street is not safe for talking," he said in the same hoarse voice.

Davis noticed the bulge of a gun under the other's tight coat. Mr. Tien was taking no chances.

"What brings you back?" he asked.

Mr. Tien shook his head, a look of disgust and worry in his face that seemed honest and unaffected. "These people. They don't know what they want. No organization. It makes me sick. So I have to do it myself. I cannot trust these people." He sighed wearily. "Do you believe it, the Government has two hundred thousand piculs of rice in this place. I told them, I told them all the time they must do something because of the rice. But nothing happens. Now General Huang is very angry about this, only what can he do? It is too late." He bent close lowering his voice. "The worst trouble is General Chien. I tell you confidentially he will have some trouble. Perhaps he will be shot. His troops are too rotten; they just desert."

"Perhaps that's why the Japanese are trying to get here ahead of the Communists," Davis suggested.

The other eyed him warily, then slowly smiled. "You are very wise. You can understand the situation."

His words were clear enough, thought Davis, but it was curious—there was an unusual expression, a pleased tone of voice, which seemed to say: "One hopes the Japanese get here first, then they will get the rice and not the Communists."

"I see," said Davis, as if answering that tone of voice rather than the other's words. He shifted his feet uneasily. "Well," he went on, "what I really wanted to ask you, do you have any kind of transportation, anything at all? Some of the military took one of my junks, and now I'm stranded with half my gear."

"It's because there is no organization," said Mr. Tien, avoiding the question. "How can anybody do anything? These people make plans but nobody follows the plans. The only thing to do is to leave as quickly as possible." He paused and his eyes closed a little. "Tell me, is Miss Lee still with you?"

"Yes—why?"

"Some of the authorities say she is a Communist. So you should tell her to be careful. Also it is good if you watch her carefully so nobody can blame her. It's very serious for you—even when she is entirely innocent."

"I'll take care of her," Davis murmured uneasily. There was Maguire, he thought; that letter, Nina herself, and now this warning—he could feel her fading away from him, and he powerless to hold her.

When they parted, Davis stood still a moment, staring after the other as he moved hurriedly away up a side street. Why should Mr. Tien warn him, why should he care? It seemed out of character. And watching Mr. Tien, he suddenly disliked him. It was not just the casual dismissal of his appeal for help. Nina and Maguire were right. There was something unpleasant about Mr. Tien,—and yet why he should think that, he did not know.

Back in the Temple the confusion had died. The staff were eating lunch, and were in a jovial mood. If it had not been for Mr. Tien, he could have been jovial, too.

"No one will come with me," said Maguire, perfectly happy at

the prospect. "I am not so popular as you."

"Orders are orders," he said vaguely, his mind on Nina.

"No," said Nina flatly. "I refuse to go without you. George will be busy, and somebody has to watch you from doing such crazy things like this morning, getting the soldier to shoot at you. Really, it is quite ridiculous."

"And," said Maguire, "Mrs. Huang won't go without George, and the four children won't go without Mrs. Huang. And Miss Chen won't go without Miss Lee. And so forth."

He brought his mind to the point. He had to keep Nina; if the officials were getting jittery, he was her best protection.

"I may need Nina," he said slowly, hoping no one would ask him why. "But I've got to draw the line there. We may have to leave in a hurry, and I can't risk any more."

He held tight to that one change, and it was soon clear the others had not expected to over-rule him but had merely wanted to test him for themselves. Once convinced he would not budge, they were perfectly happy.

The little junk got away at four that afternoon. It was a curiously festive departure, with firecrackers popping and everyone in a holiday mood except Davis and Maguire. Maguire carried a pistol hung about his waist, and two of the servants were armed. Maguire was very insistent about that as there were tales of refugees being robbed on the way to Pinghsien. Yet the gun seemed to increase his nervousness. Davis saw that he kept pushing it back on his hip as if the mere sight of the weapon were too much to bear.

When the boat was almost out of sight, he turned to the pile of boxes and furniture that stood hopefully at the water's edge.

"We'll just have to move them back to the Temple," he told Nina. "We can't leave them here overnight." Then he noticed the boxes that contained the large radio, and swore aloud. "Why weren't those put on the boat?" he asked irritably, and glanced downstream. It was too late; he couldn't call them back.

Nina had let out a little gasp. "Oh, I'm sorry!" she cried, clapping her hand to her mouth. "I meant to tell Lao Wang."

Then he saw Hsiao Lao-pan, sitting at the top of the bank, and his irritation increased. "And why didn't he go? The jeep won't hold all of us and the radio, too."

"If necessary, we could walk, Hsiao Lao-pan and I," she suggested hesitantly. "I just thought he could help, and he's so small. . . ."

There was a real distress in her eyes; and seeing that, he turned away without a word and walked up the bank. As it was not just Hsiao Lao-pan and the radio that made him angry, but his suspicions and the gnawing fear that they might prove true, he knew he had to get away from her before he said something that might hurt.

It was lonely in the Temple that evening. With most of the furniture either piled on the porch for shipping, or hidden away in the loft above Maguire's office, the place was depressing. They put a table in front of the fireplace in the living room, set the radio at one end, and had dinner at the other. After the meal, Davis lit a fire.

"There," he said, "that's more cheerful."

And to further the cheer George produced a bottle of wine.

They sat talking till nearly twelve, the fire and the wine robbing them of the energy to go to bed. Outside it had begun to rain, and the quiet sound on the roof and in the courtyard blotted out the world. Several times he walked to the porch to peer at the city, and listen. The wild excitement of the first two days was gone, and now they were in a vacuum period, a period of waiting and listening, that was harder to bear. There were not a dozen lights showing, and through the rain they were dim and blurred. There was no sound save the soft beat of the rain itself. The Japanese, he thought, could steal into the city and they would never know it.

The thought bothered him; and the next morning, still disturbed by the isolation of the Temple, he decided to move to the Navy Hostel. About seven trips with the jeep, he judged, and they could move all the remaining baggage.

Nina came with him on the first trip. "Somebody might shoot you," she said, and he smiled at that. Quite the reverse, he thought.

It was still raining, a thin steady drizzle that splattered mud up from between loose paving blocks. In the rain the half-empty streets, with their few furtive figures, were forlorn and depressing. Outside the Navy Hostel, Nielsen and another Navy man were

fussing over a truck. Nielsen sat back, wiping the rain from his face.

"How's the war down here?" Davis asked.

"Well, if we can't get this—" Nielsen looked at Nina and curbed his feelings—"this goddam truck working, we're stuck. They're going to cut the road tomorrow. Of course, they won't really. That's just the latest joke." And he wagged his head back and forth in a light, mocking laugh.

"Where's Paul?"

"He's upstairs, having his morning nervous breakdown."

Paul did have a worn, haggard look. He was struggling to close a footlocker that defied closing. He jumped at Davis:

"Any news?" he asked anxiously.

"Nothing new. The question is, who's coming—the Reds or the Japs?"

"One's as bad as the other," said Paul, and shook his head unhappily. But Davis' suggestion that he and his crew move to the Hostel, seemed to cheer him up. Nielsen was leaving that afternoon for Chiangkou, a river town thirty miles west of the ferry; and he would leave in the morning, or as soon as the truck returned. They still had those ten tons of explosives down below; the Chinese, Colonel Yeh, had promised to send a junk but of course he hadn't.

As Davis started to leave, the other turned suddenly.

"And you know what!" he burst out. "Last night some police came to see me. They said I had to pay five hundred Chinese dollars because we didn't turn in any rats for the anti-rat campaign. And how can we give them any rats when we have three of those." He pointed to a yellow cat asleep on his bed. "How's it possible? Anyway, why just now? I don't get it." Then he laughed, harshly, uncertainly. "Perhaps they want to leave everything shipshape for the Japanese."

He shook his head and turned again to the footlocker. Davis had the idea that this time Paul might really crack up.

That afternoon, when Davis and Ching finished piling the last load into the rear of the jeep, Davis paused for a final look at his home. He felt suddenly sad. The pine tree, the Temple, the empty rooms, dark and silent, the Pavilion, all appeared forlorn in the

misty dampness, as if they knew they were being deserted, left to the drip of the rain. He shivered, pushed up the collar of his wet jacket and slowly closed the gate.

It was growing dark when he reached the Navy Hostel. Nielsen, he noticed, had gone at last. Upstairs Nina was waiting for him with a hot cup of tea. She had brought some order to the room, and two lamps burned with a friendly glow. He was cold and wet and depressed, and the sight cheered him almost as much as the tea.

"No more news?" Nina asked.

"No, I haven't seen anyone all afternoon."

"I'll tell you some news," said Paul, coming in from the verandah. "I just talked to a Chinese captain who's come from Sanpo, and he said the Communists took it this morning. They'll have to climb a mountain, but that's only twenty miles."

"Did he say anything about the Japanese?"

"No. He never heard of the Japanese."

"I wish I hadn't." Davis looked up from his tea. "Anything coming up the river.?"

"Not a thing. Maybe a sampan. Nothing else, anyway. And God knows," said Paul, nervously pacing the floor, "God knows when Nielsen will get back."

Davis turned to Nina. "We'll wait till noon tomorrow for Ma-guire or Colonel Chao to get a boat here—if I don't explode in the meantime."

Paul laughed unnaturally, and began pacing the floor with all the more fury. Supper seemed to quiet him a little, but at steady intervals during the evening he got up and began again, nervously jingling his keys in his pocket. Davis tried to console him. "At least you have a truck. And if that doesn't come, you can come with us. We'll strap you on the roof." But Paul merely shook his head and kept on pacing. When Davis went to bed, the last sound he heard before he dropped off to sleep was the jingle of those keys, and the creak of shoes moving restlessly back and forth.

At five-thirty a hand pulled him out of a fitful sleep. It was still dark and he sat up slowly, rubbing his eyes, trying to see who it was.

"Davis, you better get up." It was Paul's voice, thin and querulous.

"What's happened?"

"Nothing. That's just it. I've been up all night. We've got to do something."

Davis dragged himself unwillingly out of bed, and shivered into his damp clothes. Everything was damp, his clothes, the room, the air. The drizzle of the day before had turned into a steady rain; he could hear its heavy beat on the roof. He followed Paul to the verandah, swinging his arms to stop his shivering and the chatter of his teeth.

There was no sound from the city. It was time for the morning watch, the "all's well" *tap, tap, tap* of wood on hollow bamboo. But there was only the beat of the rain and the rush of the river.

Paul nervously lit a cigarette, his hands shaking.

In the faint light of early dawn, they peered up and down the empty waterfront. There was no sign of life anywhere. Down the bank below them little streams coursed into the river. He could see it had already risen several feet. There was an angry roar from the water foaming under the bridge; even in that dim light he could see it was full of races and little whirlpools, and decked with foam. Gray misty clouds hung low overhead, and still the rain beat down.

The rising waters and the strange stillness of the city filled him with something of Paul's panic. If the river rose much more, no boat would come up the Hsiao Ho to Wuchuan. The ferry at Shih-tze Ho might even stop.

"I can't understand it," Paul kept saying. "Chiangkou's not forty miles. He should have been back last night."

There was, Davis thought, one thing they could do.

He went into Nielsen's room where Nina lay asleep. Her face was toward him, but hidden by a swirl of hair. He shook her gently, then brushed back the hair. She stirred, arched her back, and a perplexed look came to her face. Her lips parted in a scarcely audible murmur. He sat down beside her, kissed her lips, and slowly her eyes opened. Puzzled at first, she smiled slowly as sleep receded.

"Hello," he said, his eyes troubled but tender. He reached under the blanket and caught her hand. "Nina, Paul and I are going to Shih-tze Ho," he said. "The military have a phone there and we

want to see about the ferry."

"But you must eat something," she said, her voice husky.

"We'll have some coffee. It's just six now, we ought to be back by eight."

Out on the road his tenseness eased. The jeep slithered and bounced, and the rain beat wildly at the windshield. First, there were the low hills just west of the city, then the long flat stretch that moved all the way to the ferry. He kept the pedal close to the floor, and it was not yet seven, only twenty minutes from the West Gate, when they rolled up to a cluster of thatch-roofed houses a quarter of a mile east of the landing. Before one building stood a sentry in a raincoat of fibre matting. His feet, encased only in straw sandals, were blue with cold. Paul ran up to him, and they exchanged a few words, then Paul turned and waved.

"This is it," he called.

"I'm going down to the river," Davis called back, and he let the jeep move forward. At the river's edge he climbed from the protection of the windshield into a damp, icy wind that took his breath away. The water was up a little but not as much as at Wuchuan. He could see the division where the yellow of the Hsiao Ho met the gray brown of the main waterway. The Ta Kiang, the Big River, was not yet in flood. It was nearly always that way. The Little River felt the rains first. The Big River needed another twelve hours, perhaps a day.

He turned to an old farmer who was peering at him with friendly curiosity.

"What is that?" asked the old man, pointing his chin at the jeep.

"*Chi-pu-che*," Davis said, and added, "Will the ferry run today?"

The man bobbed his head. "This is a time of bitterness," he said, "but it is only the bitterness of war. For this reason, the ferry will run. If it were bitterness come from heaven, then the ferry would not run. That is the way it is."

Davis thought the man optimistic, and turned away to peer across at the town of Shih-tze Ho, a mile upstream from the ferry landing on the far shore. He thought he could see at least one junk but was not even certain of that, for the rain and a mistiness that

hung over the river all but obscured the town.

When at last he drove back to the cluster of houses, an officer came to the doorway where the sentry stood. He nodded his head in Davis' direction and rubbing his hands against the cold, genially waved him into the building. As he entered the dark bare room beyond, Paul, who was sitting in a corner wrapped about a telephone, glanced up. "Major Ling, Captain Russell," he said.

Major Ling, who was still bowing, and doing a little jig to keep warm, shook hands and extended a card. Davis fished for one of his own.

"Oh, yes, yes. I know," said the Major, bowing with enthusiastic recognition. "Captain Yueh Shih-li is very famous."

"Too polite," Davis murmured.

"Oh, you speak Chinese very well!"

Just then there was an explosive burst of shouting from Paul, and both turned to listen. God knew why, thought Davis, but on the Chinese telephone it always seemed necessary to shout. It was not just a question of being heard; rather that the operator seemed to gauge the importance of a call by the amount of rumpus one made. At last Paul put the instrument down.

"They can't find him but will call me back," he said, shaking his head in disgust.

"Who are you calling?"

"Colonel Yeh, or if they can't find him, Colonel Chao. But they can't find either." Then he nodded at Major Ling. "The Major has some bad news." He switched to Chinese. "Tell Captain Yueh Shih-li your news."

The Major's face became grave and he stopped his dancing.

"Do you know Meihsien?" he asked. "It is thirty *li* south of Wuchuan. It is where the old silk road goes over the mountains to Hangchow. If the Japanese want to take Wuchuan from Li-huang, they will come through Meihsien. Last night some Post Office people stopped here. One had just come from Meihsien and he said the people in Meihsien are all excited. It is because outside of the village they find two small pieces of paper. One is on a tree, and one is on a farmhouse. They are cut in a certain way. They are just white with no writing. It is a Japanese custom. If they know the village is safe, their agents will put up a sign like this.

If there is no sign, then they shoot everything, even a pig or a child, anything."

"How far east of Meihsien are they?"

"Some people say Changshan, but it just a rumor. Changshan is fifty *li* from Meihsien. Altogether it is eighty *li* from Wuchuan."

Davis considered. About thirty miles, and that was yesterday morning. "Have you heard from Meihsien since then?"

Major Ling shook his head. "No, but this morning I sent a man to find out if there are any signs outside Wuchuan. If you wait, he will be back by ten o'clock. Of course, if there are no signs, it does not mean the Japanese will not come. It just means *if* they come, they will shoot everything." And he laughed genially, as if he thought the question quite a joke.

But Davis hoped to be back at the Hostel by ten. He disliked leaving Nina alone. In a crisis neither Ching nor George would be much help.

At nine, to quiet his impatience and restlessness, he drove to the ferry for another look at the river. When he returned, Paul was pacing up and down and the Major sitting at the phone.

"I've had the connection twice," Paul said, "but each time someone cuts in, and now the whole line is dead."

The Major turned and threw up his hands. "It's no use," he said cheerfully. "The line is cut."

Davis shrugged his shoulders and walked abruptly to the door. If the Japanese were on their way to Meihsien, it was time to pack the jeep, take what they could, and go.

As Paul crawled into the jeep he turned to the Major. "How many troops are guarding the city? I haven't seen any for almost two days."

The Major laughed and pointed grandly to himself. "*Wo*," he said. "Just me." He was in charge of some labor troops cleaning out telephone wire. He would leave with them that afternoon. Then there would be no one.

It was almost ten when they pulled up before the Navy Hostel. The people on the muddy streets were as few as ever, and in the gloom of the rain the city seemed like some poor wretch, condemned to death, waiting miserable and hopeless for the end.

As they reached the top of the stairs, Nina came flying in from

the verandah, her eyes dancing with excitement.

"Oh, Davis, you are back! I'm so happy," she cried, and flung her arms about him, then seeing Paul's surprise, drew back, laughing and blushing at once. But, with the quick invention of a woman, suddenly embraced him as well. "I'm so glad. I thought maybe you were both dead, I don't know what." Then she seized their hands. "But just now—come quickly—a boat is coming! Really, it is true." And she pulled them with her to the verandah.

Not more than a half mile away a small junk was polling laboriously upstream, clinging close to the bank where the rush of the river was less violent. On the deck were a number of soldiers.

"It must be for me!" cried Paul. "I can see Captain Ying." He let out a whoop of joy, rushed back into the building and down the noisy stairs. In a moment he appeared on the bank below them, jumping up and down and waving his arms like a man gone mad.

Davis was not as excited. It looked very small, certainly not large enough for his gear as well as Paul's explosives.

"I'm afraid it won't take everything," he said gloomily.

And that was true. But Paul did take a ton of their equipment, and better still Paul's men reported that a junk for Captain Russell was said to be on its way.

Davis left the loading to Nina to decode an urgent radio message from Headquarters in Chungking.

"Advice received here informs us that Wuchuan is no longer safe," it read. "Essential avoid Reds as well as Japs. Suggest you make plans to leave."

"Oh, hell," he said, and stuffed it in a suitcase.

What the devil did they do with his reports, he wondered. It would probably take them a month to understand he had left Wuchuan.

Paul departed immediately after lunch, a cat under each arm. It made Davis nervous watching him go. "We'll wait till four," he told George and Nina. "In the jeep we can at least reach Chiang-kou tonight."

And with Nina he checked the pieces of luggage they would take.

"There are just personal things," she pointed out, showing him the list, "some furniture, one box of medicine, one box of ammunition, and the portable radio George is using, and a small bag of

some iron things to put on your feet—I don't know what it is."

"Ice creepers," he said. "Leave those and the furniture. Ice creepers—you'd think Headquarters would have more to do than send me—" He laughed suddenly, a short, nervous laugh. "My God, maybe I'm supposed to be in Greenland!" And with a shake of his head turned to the verandah to scan the river. At the moment he wished he were in Greenland.

He spent most of the early afternoon tramping out to the bridge and back for a look down the river. On the third trip Nina came with him.

The bridge, usually crowded at that hour, was completely empty. In Ta Shih-tze, however, as if nothing were amiss, they could see a noodle vendor sitting on a stool by his portable kitchen, one lone customer sucking in a dish.

Crossing to the village end of the bridge, they leaned over the stone wall, and peered down the Hsiao Ho, the wind and rain beating into their faces and stirring the blood to their cheeks. They could follow the river's course for nearly a mile before it curved south and was lost in the trees and brown walled farms that fringed its banks. But in all that long misty distance there was not a sign of any moving, living thing whatever, save the river itself.

He looked at his watch. It was three-thirty.

"I guess we better go," he said, raising his voice above the roar of the water under the bridge.

But an exclamation from Nina, brought his head up sharply. She had turned about and was staring upstream toward the east. He followed her gaze and there in the distance was a junk moving out from the city shore.

He stared incredulously; but Nina dashed across to the far side, and with a little jump hoisted herself half up on the wall, so that her legs dangled free of the ground. As soon as the ship came within hailing distance she began shouting excitedly to the boatmen. For a moment Davis made no effort to move, his eyes fixed vaguely on the pink back of her bare legs. In that position they were more than a little exposed in spite of her raincoat and shiny rubber boots. There was something seductive about rubber boots, he thought.

Nina was bargaining for passage to Pinghsien. "Five persons,

three thousand pounds of baggage. You will make your fortune!"

"It is not possible," the boatmen shouted back. "We have eggs to carry."

"Tell them," said Davis, coming up beside her, "tell them the military will take their boat if we don't, and then they will get nothing."

"I did it, but it is no use. The master went to the city, so they just say impossible."

The junk was now close to the bridge. "We will pay seven thousand dollars," Nina cried. But the boatmen shook their heads. "Ten thousand."

"Not possible," yelled the man at the stern. Then just as they swept under the arch, he glanced up. "Twenty thousand," he said.

Nina was jubilant. "Everything is all right," she cried. "They will stop below the Navy gate. We can finish the bargaining down there."

The junk moved into shore by an old stone jetty some distance below the Hostel. When they reached it, the junkmen were stolidly raising the mast, now that the bridge was passed. They would not bargain further. It was necessary to wait till the Lao-pan, the old master, returned.

"Where do you come from?" she asked.

"From Meihsien," said one of the men, and pointed to several huge baskets full of eggs. "We bring eggs from Meihsien for the market in Pinghsien."

Davis raised his head. "Meihsien? Are the Japanese near Meihsien?"

But the boatman shook his head. There was some talk of the Japanese, he said, but he knew nothing of them. The subject did not seem to interest him. The Japanese were one thing, eggs another; and he had an eye only for eggs.

The day was fading when the junk master finally appeared. He was a grizzled old man with bandy legs, but his eyes were sharp and he moved about the junk with sturdy, cat-like sureness. For several minutes he paid no attention to their proposal, nor to them, but grumbled complainingly to himself. Apparently, he had found no eggs. At length he turned to Nina, fixing her with his sharp eyes.

"All right," he said. "Eighteen thousand." In the end they set-

bled for sixteen.

It was seven before they had loaded all their remaining baggage aboard the junk and their personal gear in the jeep. He had hoped to leave at once, but Ching and Hsiao Lao-pan, who were to go with the junk, had cooked an omelette and a pot of coffee.

As they sat eating they heard steps on the stairs, and a moment later a Chinese army officer in wet, dirty clothes stumbled into the room. Even in the dim light of the single lamp they could see that his face was haggard and lined with weariness. He had to see Lieutenant Paul right away, he said. Lieutenant Paul would have to leave his supplies because the road on the other side of the ferry was cut, and the ferry itself was being moved to Chiangkou. For this reason the truck could not return. He had two horses. They must leave at once.

He said all this in a toneless rush, and when he discovered Paul was gone, he sank to a chair, dropped his head into his hands and broke into a quiet but steady stream of profanity that had the rhythmic swing of a temple chant. It was a very curious performance. At last he pulled himself to his feet and without a word stumbled down the stairs. A moment later they heard the faint beat of horses' hooves receding into the night.

Davis who had listened to the officer without expression, suddenly jumped to his feet. "Now we've got to put the jeep on the junk," he mumbled. But when he reached the jetty he found the junkmen opposed. It would be too dangerous at night. Also by early dawn the river would be higher, bringing the deck of the junk close to the top of the jetty.

"But we cannot wait till the dawn," he protested. That would be impossible. The Japanese might arrive before the dawn.

"Why?" asked the boat master.

"Why?" he cried. "Why has no meaning! If they come, they come!"

"But, Prior-born, they were not at Meihsien in the morning, and in Meihsien it was said they were thirty *li* away. If we go at five there is still time. Anyway," he added, "it is impossible to move before dawn, the river is too dangerous, the night too black."

In the end Davis gave up the struggle. It was plain enough; nothing would induce them to leave till the dawn.

Back at the Hostel George had taken the cover off the portable radio and he and Nina were listening to the end of the Chungking news. "Nothing to report about China," said George, "Everything peaceful in East China," he added, laughing half-heartedly.

Nina thought they should move to the junk right away, and leave the jeep on the jetty till the river was favorable, but Davis was against it. He was very tired, and the junk would not leave before dawn. It was better to get some sleep in a decent bed. And considering the boatman's news, Wuchuan had at least another half-day.

Nina had the only alarm clock. He told her to wake him at four, then walked into Paul's room, spread out his bedding roll on Paul's bed, took off his outer clothes and fell wearily into his blankets.

But as soon as he was in bed, he knew he couldn't sleep. Alone in the darkness, he felt cold and feverish. His mind, drugged with sleep a moment before, grew wide awake, and stirred him with such wild imaginings that he wanted to groan aloud. He heard Nina go to bed sometime later, saw the light through the door chink, heard the bed creak; then the light went out, and the night was still except for the faint murmur of the river and the thresh of the rain.

He lay quiet awhile, thinking of Nina, thinking of the Japanese—suppose they came now, under the cover of the darkness? He turned over with a shiver. The thing to do was to lie still and think of nothing, of nothingness. . . . He could see it, an empty universe going on and on down into an enormous black vortex, a whirling funnel that kept narrowing. . . . Suddenly, it was intolerable. And with a little murmur of exasperation he sat up. He felt hot and cold at once, and his body was clammy.

It might be malaria, he thought. He'd had a little the spring before. But more likely just fatigue and nerves. He lit the lamp beside him, and from the light a cigarette. Then he blew out the lamp, climbed out of bed and walked shivering to the porch. But the night revealed nothing; there was only blackness, the sound of rain and river and the red glow of his cigarette. He turned slowly, walked back to his bed, paused, then tried the door to Nina's room. It opened with a creak. She stirred suddenly.

"Is that you, Davis?"

"Yes," he whispered. Then he sat down on her bed. "I can't sleep."

Her arms rose, pulled him into the blankets beside her, folded him in her warmth, and almost at once the tension began to dissolve.

Then she drew away from him a little.

"Davis," she said softly, a faint emotion in her voice. "There is something in your manner, in your eyes when you look at me. It makes me worried. Don't you love me?"

"Yes, I love you," he whispered with sudden passion, a fierceness in the sound; then his voice grew hesitant. "But . . . that's just it . . . I'm disturbed about you. There are stories about you. People say you're a Communist agent. I don't want anything to happen to you and—" he raised his head—"it's just if there is anything like that, how can you love me? Do you love me?"

There was an agony in the question. He could feel her stiffen at his words.

"Please, Davis. You must believe me!" She was on the verge of tears. "I love you so much I don't know how to say it . . . what to say . . ."

He believed her, and yet he didn't. He wanted to laugh, a hollow, mocking, cruelly painful laugh, because he loved her and believed she loved him, and yet at the edges of their love was this ragged suspicion that she might be using him for some purpose of her own.

She drew close to him, holding him with a desperation. "You must, you must believe me." Her voice was panic-stricken, and shaken by sobs. "Believe me, I love you! I'm not anything you think. How could I? You must know I love you. I give you anything, Davis, my mind, my body, even my life. Anything. Always since that night . . . before I went away to Changhsing . . ." Tears drowned her voice and she drew his head tightly to her breast.

Slowly the suspicion faded. He tried to reply, but no words came. He could feel the tremble in her bosom. He pushed away the silk and kissed her there, drew her closer, raised his head and kissed her throat and then her lips. And slowly her breathing grew deeper, smoother. And slowly she stirred against him, drawing away the

ache in his body and the distress in his mind.

Some time later his head sank again to her bosom and he fell asleep. Gently she pressed it to the hollow between her breasts, and her eyes closed while to her face came a faint smile, glowing and unfathomable.

He couldn't think what it was. Something he had dreamt. It was like that explosion at the ABC Café, people running and shouting. He had never, not even the night before, felt so tense, every muscle taut, his hands moist, his ears straining for the slightest sound. The room was as black as ever, and the stillness even more profound. Very distantly he caught the murmur of the river, but the rain had stopped.

Then he felt his back getting cold, and lay down on one elbow. Fumbling on the table, he found Nina's flashlight. Her clock said two, but his own watch said five. He put the clock to his ear, and shook his head. Then he peered down at Nina. She was curled up like a child, half-naked and shivering. He gathered the blankets about her and sat her up.

"Nina, we're late! It's five o'clock!"

When she stirred he let her go, and jumping from the bed, ran for the door. But just as he opened it, he stiffened as if caught in a blast of icy wind.

There it was. It had not been a dream. Faint in the distance, but loud enough to echo hollowly in the hills across the river, desolate, isolated in its sound, came the heavy thumping burst of a machine-gun.

CHAPTER XVI

Departure at Dawn

AFTERWARD he found it hard to recall the events that followed immediately. But he did remember hurtling down the stairs with his bedding roll, the buckles of the loose straps clattering noisily, dismally behind him, the sound fusing in his mind with the more deadly rumble in the distance.

Tossing his luggage in the back of the jeep which was housed in the covered passage by the front gate, he turned on the lights and threw back the hood. Taking a small can, he squirted gas into the carburetor. Then he leapt to the seat and pressed the starter. The motor roared at once but in a moment died as alcohol sucked in behind the gas. He pulled out the choke, it roared again, then with a cough went dead. Sweat gathered on his forehead.

Ching appeared, and he gave him the small can. "Just a little but keep pouring." The motor roared again. He raced it hard. "That's enough." He let it quiet a little, and slowly pulled the choke. The motor hesitated, spat fretfully a moment, but held. He raced it again and it roared smoothly. He pulled the throttle out a little, climbed out and wiped the sweat from his face.

"I go back help Miss Lee," said Ching. "She just look see, everything come down."

Davis nodded and turned to the gate. There was an ominous sound of running in the street, then a screaming that made him wince. He opened the gate a narrow crack. He could feel the crowd more sharply than he could see it, the rustle and stir, the gasps for breath. The screams came from the wall gate.

He turned back to the jeep. Where in God's name did they all come from, he wondered. He would have supposed there were less than a hundred people in the whole city.

George was busy loading his baggage in the jeep. It was already half full.

"Is there any more?" Davis asked.

"No, no," said George with a nervous smile. "They bring the last things."

Nina appeared at that moment, Hsiao Lao-pan behind her, half-hidden under a pile of coats and bedding.

She blinked in the light. "Don't look at me. I look too terrible," she laughed, brushing back her tousled hair, and biting at her pale lips.

"Come on," said Davis. He liked that pale, tousled look. He did not say so, but he smiled at her and his eyes made up for his lack of words.

As soon as Ching and George appeared, he climbed into the jeep and Ching swung the gate doors wide. The street was deserted, the mob gone; but from the wall gate there still came a sound of screaming. And under the screaming a moaning sound.

"It is better to turn out the lights," said George. "Their shine will pierce too far." He spoke in a whisper as if the enemy might overhear.

The lights went off. Out in the street Ching held a flashlight.

"Oh, it is too awful," said Nina in an agonized voice. "What is it?"

Ching ran ahead with the light, waving the jeep on toward the gate, then with a startled shout, waved it back. Davis stopped and jumped out. "What's the trouble?" Ching made no answer, but played his light on the wall gate. Piled into that narrow tunnel was a writhing mass of people. Those on the bottom never moved. At one side the head of a child protruded, smashed and bloody. Next to it a dead pig. Free of the press, an old woman and a boy fought and scratched at the pile, screaming to the dead and dying to let them through.

He turned away just in time to catch Nina. "Don't look," he said. "It will just make you sick."

She obeyed without a word, and they hurried back to the car.

He turned it about and drove slowly up the street, following the faint gleam of the flashlight. He knew the way; first into Hsi Chang Kai, then down Iron Cat Street to the road where the west wall had once stood, and so back to the river.

At Hsi Chang Kai he glanced east; the street was deserted but

even as he looked, a burst of firing came again from somewhere in the east. On Iron Cat Street they picked up speed. He could see his way better now. They passed a number of people hurrying in the same direction. As they turned into the Wall Road, an old man forced them to stop. Dropping to his knees in front of the jeep, he begged them not to kill him.

"We are not Japanese," said Nina with sudden authority. "Get up and go to the country. You will be safe in the country."

But the old man only stared at them, his face bewildered. They swung round him and moved on. Once, passing an open field, a rush of wind struck Davis' cheek, bringing a cold fresh taste that gave promise of clearing weather. Hsiao Lao-pan, who was crouched down on the hood, suddenly, for no apparent reason, let out a blood curdling whoop of exuberance, then shrank down and peered at them with an enormous, owlish grin, as if caught in some forbidden mischief.

Nina told him to hush, but Davis nodded approval and wagged a thumb in the air. "That's fine. Do it again."

The road opened at the river bank onto an indefinite plateau which sank unevenly to the water. At the east end of the plateau was the jetty, thrusting out dark and indistinct from the vague shapes of land and buildings. Once they nearly crashed into a narrow gully, then bounced down a series of wide mud steps, and the way was smooth to the stone landing ahead. For a moment, he had the wild thought that the junk had gone, but an instant later saw the mast standing up out of the gloom.

As they drew up to the junk, the old *Lao-pan*, who was squatting on the deck, smoking a long pipe, bobbed his head.

"They've come," he announced to no one in particular. He seemed neither excited by the lateness of their arrival nor the intermittent gunfire in the distance. The dull thumping of machine-guns was now augmented by the sharper crackle of rifles, but the sound seemed no nearer.

At last the old man knocked the ashes from his pipe, and waved a querulous hand at the jeep. "How will you lift it to the ship?"

Nina repeated the question, and Davis shook his head. He climbed out and ran to the end of the jetty. But the Captain,

divining his intent, waved him back, with a loud burst of disapproval.

"He says the end of the stones is three feet under water. He says you must put the car on at this place."

"But I can't swing the jeep around. The jetty's too narrow. I need a straight approach." He made a T with his hands to show what he meant.

She nodded and explained.

"Take the tools, everything," he said to Ching, who was unloading their gear. In the end, he thought, they would leave the jeep.

But the *Lao-pan* was not dismayed. It could be done, he said, and he had the boatmen make a runway of planks. The angle was too sharp, however, and the front wheels skewed off, the jeep crashing back on the stones. Then the old man put in more boards and laced them together with rope. The jeep rose successfully this time, but the angle was still too sharp; there was not enough space between the mast and the deck house. And with a curse Davis let it roll back to the jetty.

The Captain and one of the boatmen were arguing furiously, Nina standing by. "Wait," she said, waving a restraining hand as if he were about to depart. "Maybe they have a good idea."

It was growing light, he noticed; it was after six. Several refugees had quietly boarded the ship, and were sitting silently in the bow watching the operation. Several more were just then hurrying down the quay. They couldn't wait much longer. Even if the Japanese were slow in reaching the river, the Chinese would soon swamp them now that daylight was at hand.

Just at that moment, as if to rebuke his thought, the sound of firing broke out once more; and this time there was no mistaking, it had moved much closer. He glanced nervously up the river. A moment before he had noticed a thin stream of people moving along the shore path to the bridge, and others running across it. But now the bridge was suddenly deserted, and the thin stream was moving in reverse.

"We'll have to leave it," he said as Nina jumped down beside the car. "Time's run out."

"No, no," she cried, her eyes bright with resolution. "They have

a plan. Just drive it down the river a short distance. There is a place on the bank. It will only be a few minutes."

He obeyed mechanically, backing slowly, his resignation no match for her resolve. The long pile of stones which had seemed of no length at all half an hour before, now seemed to have no end. Twice he stopped to wipe his dripping hands. When he reached the bank, Nina jumped in beside him. He kept thinking, "Suppose they come now, suppose they suddenly appear over the top of the bank."

When they bumped down to the point at the water's edge indicated by the boatmen, the junk was still well upriver. Davis looked back impatiently. People were beginning to stream by them, their faces set. There was no laughter in China that morning.

He turned suddenly to Nina. "Can you swim?" he asked.

She smiled. "No, I can't do it."

He peered upstream. The junk seemed to hang immobile, making no progress at all. "Goddam it," he burst out suddenly, "why can't they hurry?"

She drew close to him and touched his arm.

"Don't worry," she whispered, smiling up at him with a troubled, questioning expression. "Everything will be all right."

He compressed his lips, returned her smile distractedly, shook his head and said nothing.

When at last the junk slid into shore, he took a long breath, trying to calm himself; but he could still feel a hopeless shake in his hands.

A boatman started to lower the plank runway, but stopped when another yelled some word of warning. Then an excited argument began between the *Lao-pan* and the rest of the crew. The junk was only five yards from shore; but there it hung, the boatman, who had yelled, holding it away with a long bamboo pole. Davis ground his teeth and looked for George.

"George, for God's sake, tell them to do something."

George glanced down with a frightened, agitated face. "I think it is no use."

Nina who had been listening intently, now nodded her head. "Yes, he is right. The land is flat under the water and not so deep. If you put the car on the ship, they say it will push the boat down so it will be stationary in the mud."

Davis threw up his hands. "All right. Then we leave it. Come on, let's go."

But she stopped him a second time.

"No, listen to me. Back in that small house." She pointed up the wide bank to a large mat shed that had once served as a tea house. "Just put it inside, and shut the door. Then maybe nobody can find it."

He smiled, shaking his head, but again he obeyed mechanically. He felt suddenly ashamed. While he fumed, Nina kept calm and used her head.

At the top of the bank she jumped out. The door consisted of two wooden frames, covered with bamboo matting; they formed the entire front of the building and were held together by a piece of string. She tore it away, swung the doors wide, and he drove in.

As he leapt from the jeep, she grabbed him, and reaching inside his field jacket, extracted a fountain pen.

"Now a piece of paper, quickly! I will tell you later. Quickly, hurry!"

He probed in his pocket and fished out a used envelope, then walked to the entrance and pulled both doors shut. Finding a large stone, he rolled it up to the jamb. Then hearing a confused shouting from the river, he turned and stared. A crowd of forty or more people were milling in the water, clutching at the junk. It was already beginning to list. Above their shouts rose the wild, obscene denunciation of the old Master.

"Nina, hurry!" he cried, "or we'll lose the ship!"

She slipped out at last, he moved the stone in place, and they raced for the water. Splashing into it, he turned and picked her up.

"No! No! I can do it!" she protested, but he paid no attention. He felt the tugging water creep up his legs, almost to his waist. It was icy cold.

"Captain, go to the front! Go to the front!" George was shouting. George and Hsiao Lao-pan were there to help them up. Hands reached down and in a moment they were on the junk.

The junk was already crowded and still the growing press in the water fought and struggled. Each clawed as wildly at his neighbor as at the ship's rail, so few were getting aboard. The *Lao-pan* was at the tiller, the boatmen were straining at their poles to free the

junk, which the score of desperate hands clinging to the rail prevented. The others on the junk simply stared, making no effort to push those hands away.

Seeing this, Davis worked his way quickly down the deck to the starboard side and began tearing at the hands that clutched the rail. But as fast as he tore one man free, others seized the side of the ship, their faces drawn back horribly from clenched teeth, their eyes wild, seeing nothing.

Slowly his face took on the same savage look. Then his gaze fixed on a giant of a man with a broad shaven head, who was forcing his way through the crowd, hurling aside anyone in his way with particular ferocity.

As the man reached the ship, Davis drew his gun. With one spring, the man was crouched on the rail. At the same time Davis seized him by the throat and brought his pistol down on that clean shaven head with a crash that sounded like a rifle shot.

The man's scalp opened like a weak seam and a rush of blood fountained over him. He shuddered slightly, then without a sound toppled over backward to sprawl half in the water, half on the bank, a foolish grin fixed on his blood-smeared face.

The crowd froze, as if that single blow had struck them all. Their eyes all turned on Davis, neither with hate nor bitterness, approval nor disapproval, but with a dumb, uncomprehending look that was helpless, and incapable of emotion. In that same instant the junk slid away from shore.

One man and a girl still clung to the rail. George helped the man aboard and Davis pulled in the girl. But he was not aware of the girl; he stood as he had a moment before, his pistol clutched in his hand, his eyes fixed on that white face with the crimson smear, the foolish grin, and the blood stain widening on the sand by the water's edge.

At last he forced his gaze back up the river. There was a sound of rifle fire from the ridge, and once a bullet whined high overhead. But the bridge was too far away; he could make out nothing but the bridge itself. His eyes came back to the bank, and as if by magic the crowd that had been so dense a moment before had disappeared. There were only little knots of people hurrying along the muddy river path. But at the water's edge, staring motionless

at the sky, still lay the man with the crimson head. Davis screwed up his eyes, and turned away. He took a step toward some baggage, and sat down heavily. He felt suddenly weak, and for an instant he thought he might be sick.

When the feeling subsided a little, he stared at the baggage under him. It was his own bedding roll, and mechanically he began to buckle the straps. Nearby Ching and Nina and Hsiao Lao-pan were fussing over something, but he made no effort to investigate. There was still this nausea to fight off.

In a moment Nina came and sat beside him.

"There will be some coffee in a minute," she said.

He nodded absently without taking his eyes from the brown bank slipping past them.

"It's strange," he said, "the contradictions you see in yourself at a time like this." He spoke in a detached way, a weary quality to his voice. "I wanted to hit that man. God, I wanted to hit him. Now it makes me sick. Not just hitting him, wanting to hit him."

"Of course," she whispered quickly, and put her hand on his.

He turned, moistened his lips as if to speak, but only smiled and squeezed her arm. Then, as if fearful of giving way to emotion, he turned and looked about the boat, and grew aware for the first time of its noises and activity. The other refugees—they were fewer than he thought, hardly more than twenty—were sitting silent in the bow. They were very poor people, for the most part. Their faces still had a set, staring look, numb from the panic of their flight, from leaving their homes, with no sure future ahead and death from starvation on all sides. It was a very tragic look. The boatmen were a violent contrast, pushing energetically at their oars, laughing, shouting at each other, as if this were only another day.

Looking astern, he caught the *Lao-pan's* eye, and with an approving nod, the old man brought an imaginary gun down on an imaginary head with sweeping violence. Then he thrust a thumb in the air, laughed and said, "Very good."

Davis shook his head. "It was not so funny. I may have killed him."

"Not true," said the other. And he gestured that the blow had been a glancing one, far from solid. "But," he added, "the river is

rising so it is all the same."

Davis stood up and walked forward. Dead or not, he did not want to think about it. Like Nina, he should think ahead. He felt an almost sentimental pang about the jeep. It was like losing an old friend.

Unlocking his camphor chest, he drew out his carbine, and fitted it with a full clip of ammunition. There might be Japanese on the bank ahead, and should they open fire he might hold them off a little till the junk was clear. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was something.

When he came back to the bedding roll, Ching had a suitcase spread with coffee, tangerines, toast and cheese. It seemed a very good meal, and with its warmth inside him he slowly relaxed. When one thought back, they were very lucky to have lost only the jeep. He turned to Nina with a smile.

"What did you write on the jeep? What was that little gesture for?"

"Perhaps it won't help." She stared off at the swirling water, recollecting her words. "I said, 'Respectfully pity this *chi-pu-che* belonging to the honorable American Army. If you mistreat it you will be beaten. If you treat it kindly, you will be rewarded.' Then I put your name, 'General Yueh Shih Li.' " She laughed, "You see, if just some Chinese *lao-pai-hsing* find it, then maybe they will obey the writing. But if the Japanese find it they will not obey it, I think."

"You think so?" He regarded her with amusement. "And suppose the Communists find it?"

But she merely raised her eyebrows, smiling secretively, then ran a hand along his wet thigh. "I also think you should change those things."

Though aware of their dampness and the cold wind, it had not occurred to him that he should do anything about it.

But now he retreated to the bow where he had his chest, fished out some long underdrawers and a dry pair of trousers, then looked about for some privacy. There was only the deckhouse with its bamboo roof, open at each end; and as he began extracting himself from his wet clothing, all the refugees in the bow turned as one person to stare at the performance; two women who weren't able

to see stood up. He hesitated a moment, then laughed, and went on methodically with his changing. In China, he thought, one never knew whether to laugh or cry.

He was just lacing his belt into his fresh trousers when an excited murmur drew all eyes away from him to the shore.

Clutching at his clothing, he peered out. The river had grown wider and more sluggish. In the distance he could see the broader flood of the Ta Kiang. They were hugging the right bank, preparatory to rounding the point at the confluence of the two streams and heading up the larger river. Two of the boatmen had started to hoist the sail, but now paused to stare at the shore as well. He followed their gaze to the motor road, which at that point, curved close to the bank. Trudging along the road in single file, not two hundred yards away, was a ragged column of soldiers who wore boots and unfamiliar caps, peaked at the crown. They walked with a peculiar shuffle, their eyes fixed on the road, as if they were very tired. He stared fascinated a moment. So this was it, the enemy, the deadly Jap!

Still clutching at his trousers he ran back through the deck house to the stern. He swept off his Army cap, seized his carbine, and dragging Nina out of danger, dropped behind their luggage. He put the gun to his shoulder and squinted through the sight. This was his chance, he thought elatedly, perhaps the only chance he would ever have.

He looked inquiringly at the *Lao-pan*. The *Lao-pan* was nodding his head excitedly. "Shoot, shoot!" he said in a hoarse whisper.

"Wait a minute," Davis called back. "If we shoot now, they can shoot, too. Wait till we are below them."

He smiled happily. "The deadly Jap," he muttered to himself.

Once below that open strip of road, he could empty his clip before the Japanese could reply. First, they would run for cover, and by then the junk would be well beyond range. And if they pursued to the shore, it would not help them, for by that time the junk would have moved into the Ta Kiang on the far side of the point. They would never have a chance.

He glanced ahead. The sail was moving up again; and as the wind caught it with a sharp crackle, the junk gathered speed. Then Nina put out a hand, and pushed the barrel down.

He looked at her, surprised. Her face was troubled.

"Please, Davis," she said, her eyes pleading. "Just for me."

"But why?" He looked back desperately. In another moment it would be too late. "There's no risk."

"Don't ask me why," she begged. "It is just I hate it. You don't have to do it, so why do it?"

He shook his head and turned to the gun, but it was no use. At last he put the carbine down, a sound of exasperation breaking from his lips.

"All right, Nina, but—" he shook his head—"why be so sentimental?"

She began picking at a loose thread in the canvas of his bedding roll. "I don't know," she murmured, her eyes on the canvas.

Watching her, his face softened, and a faint smile played at the corners of his mouth. At last he turned over on his back. "Of course, logically," he went on suddenly, "you admit you have no leg to stand on. You help me to help someone else to bomb these same people." He threw out his hands. "But of course logic is only logic, and so to hell with it."

She turned to him, her eyes bright with amusement. "You look very funny, lying on your back, trying to be a philosopher, with your clothes falling down."

He arranged his sagging trousers.

"Of course," she smiled. "It's because I am just a *wo*-man. I am not a *man*." Then she nestled down beside him. "You know what the *Lao-pan* just said." She pointed her little chin at the old man. "He is very disgusted with me. He said this is the way women are. They are so stupid they cannot do anything worthwhile except bring out a son. If they could not do that, it would be a good plan to throw them in a river." She paused and turned on her side to look off at the water, now rushing by in turbulence as they moved upstream into the Ta Kiang. "Will you give me a son?"

"What's that?" he said and glanced quickly at George. But George was paying no attention. He shook his head. "I hope not."

"But I hope your hope is no good." And furtively catching his hand, she drew it eagerly into the warm secrecy of her coat. "At least, can I take this?"

They were silent a moment, each studying the river. At last a

little sigh stirred her bosom, and without looking up, as if talking to herself, she said:

"There is a poem by a writer in the Tang dynasty, I don't remember his name, about some warriors who went to fight in a noble cause, and they were all killed. I don't know why it happened. It was many years ago. But I remember the last two lines. It is something like this:

Pitiful are the bones by the Indefinite River,
Yet still they live in the dreams of the Secret Chamber.

That means a young girl's heart, I think. They live in her dreams. It will be the same for me after you are gone."

He turned his head and looked down at her quietly, his face serious and composed.

"I'm not going."

She smiled up at him. "Never?"

But he could not tell if she were serious or not, so he did not answer. "It's a good poem, whatever it means. Where is the Indefinite River?"

"It's in North China in Shensi Province. It's called Wu Ting Ho. Wu Ting means indefinite. Just now this river is so wide." She swept her hand over the horizon. "It is just an indefinite river. Where will it take us? It is like life, nothing certain, nothing definite."

He sat up a little, his eyes following the sweep of her arm and peered about him. The firing in the distance had long since stopped, and a curious quiet possessed the world. No boat, no living thing moved in that broad expanse. The rush of water under the junk, the faint murmur of voices, the wind creaking the bamboo ribs of the sail were sounds detached, only serving to make the quiet more profound. And slowly the beauty of field and river, of the White Cloud Pagoda receding in the distance, something of that infinite stillness slid into his heart, bringing a sense of peace that brushed aside all exasperations. And companion to that peace was the warmth that radiated through him from the small hand which curved so tightly over his.

CHAPTER XVII

The House on Long White Elephant Street

IT WAS three o'clock when Chiangkou came in sight. Since noon there had been a pall of smoke on the eastern horizon that rose at least a mile above the earth before it streamed southward in a long black line.

"It is like the first days of the war," said George. "Every city I live in, always bombing and burning and black smoke. It makes me nervous just to see it."

"But those days were better than this," said Nina quietly, and turned to Davis. "You would like China better if you saw it in those days. If you sell Japanese goods, people will attack you. Everybody wants to resist." She smiled wanly. "But now nobody cares. If you can sell Japanese goods, you are very clever." She looked inquiringly at Davis. "The spirit is died."

"Dead," he said absently. His eyes were fixed on the waterfront. The shore was jammed with shipping, hundreds of coolies working feverishly, men shouting, wheelbarrows squeaking. "This is where we came in," he thought.

They pulled into shore above the town; and the old *Lao-pan* announced he had business in Chiangkou; they would not sail again till dawn, he said.

Davis and Nina went ashore together to stretch their legs. Near one of the city gates they met Mr. Tan, the manager of the Wuchuan Farmers' Bank, who came hurrying by. He paused with an exclamation and greeted Davis exuberantly, as even slight acquaintances will do when they meet in foreign parts; and they conversed politely in Chinese, for Mr. Tan knew no English. He paid no attention to Nina until Davis told him that the Japanese had captured Wuchuan; then he forgot his manners and turned to her excitedly. She was standing to one side, shy and reserved as she always was in the presence of his friends among the officials. It

was the attitude expected of a woman.

"The Japanese!" he blurted out in his native Ningpo dialect, his eyes popping. "Was there any fighting?"

She shook her head. No, no fighting. And Mr. Tan suddenly screwed up his face in disgust. "You see," he said bitterly. "It is always the same. Just talk but nobody does anything. I should not say this, but I think Captain Russell knows quite well, how the situation is. Nobody cares about anything, just money, money, money. Frankly if the Communists capture the whole country, who is to blame? Only the Government. It makes me sick."

And even after they had parted, and Mr. Tan was some distance away, they could see him still angrily shaking his head.

Evening was approaching when they reached the river, and in the west the clouds had broken so that a brilliant flood of sunset light set the sombre banks, the junks and the river ablaze with a ruddy, crimson glow. Hsiao Lao-pan, squatting in the bow, black against the brilliant sky, was playing a flute, simple folk music that had a quiet melancholy. It seemed to affect Nina, for she grew pensive, and as soon as they were settled down on the junk, huddled close to Davis.

"Just now everything is too beautiful," she whispered. "It makes me sad because I know it cannot last. If this would only go on and on. . . ."

He had no quarrel there. The sunset, the flute, the voices on the river, the bustle of activity on the junk, the smell of cooking, and Nina beside him. He could wish that, too.

"And why can't it?" he asked aloud.

Her eyes were far away. "When we go to Shanghai we could have a house." She waved a hand. "Just us. With a garden. And at night you can take me dancing on Nanking Road." She looked at him delightedly. "Will you take me dancing?"

His face had grown thoughtful. "Nina, tell me. If I stayed in China, what could I do? How could I fit in?"

"You could fit in with me," she laughed.

"No, I'm serious. Do Americans practice law in Shanghai?"

But she didn't answer. Instead, she turned to him with sudden emotion. "Oh, Davis, don't," she whispered, her underlip trembling, "don't talk like that. Just now it seems all right, but later—"

She shook her head, and when he would have replied, she put a hand to his mouth; and the tenseness in her fingers more than the fingers themselves held him quiet. "It's my fault, but, please . . ." There were tears in her eyes. "I shouldn't talk like this."

"But I mean it. I'm not going home. How often do I have to say it?"

She shook her head. "Just now—" She shook her head again, and turned away to struggle silently with her emotion.

"Please," she said in a moment. "Let's not think about those things just now. Just now, let's think only about now, about the sunset, and some noodles—do you smell it? And Hsiao Lao-pan playing his music." She smiled up at him at last. "Okay?"

It wasn't difficult. *Now* was pleasant enough. And so the night passed and the second day and the second night, and the third day and the third night; and the banks and brown rice fields, the farms and the hills became the horizon, something to be looked at but unrelated to their world. And it was a good world. The refugees had almost nothing, so Davis fed them, and they relaxed and told stories and sang songs. And Hsiao Lao-pan played his flute. It was the most peaceful and the happiest two days he could remember. At night it grew cold, but even with the cold and the hard deck boards he slept soundly. He let his beard grow and by the third night he had a five days' growth of reddish stubble. It made Nina laugh, and when she drew her hand across his cheek she let out a little exclamation. "It's exciting," she said. The boatmen and the refugees called him Old Red Beard; it was an honorable name.

Slowly, there came to be an illusion that the journey was endless; but at ten o'clock on the morning of the fourth day, the illusion collapsed like a pricked bubble. Rounding a bend in the river, they saw before them a gray pagoda, and in the distance, rising out of the flat valley floor with cold blue mountains to east and west, were the walls and smoky roofs of Pinghsien.

On a street known as the Long White Elephant Street he stopped before a gloomy gray brick wall, topped with bits of broken glass. There was, he noted, something about the construction of foreign properties that made it impossible to recognize them as anything else. They had a cold, forbidding quality that struck one at once.

No Chinese had the same respect for straight lines, and that very carelessness gave a human ease to their construction.

Nina, who had walked behind him like a dutiful Chinese wife, now touched his arm. "Is this the place?"

"Yes," he said. "Gloomy, isn't it?" And he knocked on the gate.

The man who opened the door was unfamiliar but bowed and nodded as if he expected them. Inside the gate he thought at once of the Navy Hostel in Wuchuan. A huge house occupied most of the grounds, a house with wide verandahs on the upper floors. It looked dusty and in need of paint. The small area in front of the house was paved with brick except for two forlorn patches of mud, relieved by several potted chrysanthemums. Like the house, they were faded and dusty.

As they stood there, a little feminine squeal broke from the building, and Miss Chen came bursting from the open doorway, all smiles and excitement.

Her first remark was to inquire when they might return to Wuchuan. She hoped it would be soon. Pinghsien was impossible. Everything about it terrified her; most of all, she was terrified of the little Catholic Priest.

She whispered excitedly to Nina, and Nina burst out laughing.

"He pinched her," said Nina.

He had a black beard, Miss Chen rattled on. As big as a house. It was especially frightening. Then Nina pointed to Davis' stubble, and they both dissolved into giggles, which ended a moment later in a gasp from Miss Chen. And the two fled into the house.

The cause of the flight was Father Fogarty himself, who had just entered the compound followed by Maguire. Davis had never seen Maguire so glad to see him. The weight of the world seemed to lift from his shoulders.

"So many troubles," Maguire laughed. "So many worries." And he laughed again. "But now," he seemed to add, "they are all yours."

Davis turned to Father Fogarty. The Priest was regarding him with amusement, his small blue eyes twinkling merrily. He was a thick-set little man, neatly dressed in a black silk cap and a long black robe that almost matched his beard.

"Well, now," he said softly, his brogue pleasantly unobtrusive,

"if it isn't Captain Russell. You've been keeping us on pins and needles for three days now, I hope you know. But as I told Mr. Hsiung, there was no need to worry. You're not the same as that wild bunch that's taken over the Protestant Mission. Navy men, they tell us." His pudgy body began to shake with silent chuckles. "They're a sketch, better than the Variety."

He paused to light a pipe. "Come along. I'll show you over the property."

He led the way down a narrow passage between the house and the compound wall. At the back of the house there was but little more ground than at the front. And it was occupied almost entirely by a well, covered with a wooden roof. The path they were on continued under a covered walk to the rear wall of the compound where it ended in a heavy door.

"That door will do you no good," said Father Fogarty. "It's nailed tight. We had a small chapel beyond but the Japs burned it. That was in Forty-two when they were chasing your people—the Doolittle Mission. And if you don't mind a bit of humor, they did little enough compared to the waste and murder the Japanese perpetrated by way of revenge. It's ironical, isn't it? I suppose they killed about eighty thousand people, and I doubt if one in ten ever heard of the bombing of Tokyo. But regarding the chapel, there's an hotel on the other side now. It's not too clean either; I mean women and such. But the rent is good and I suppose that atones for whatever sins are committed on the property. I said I suppose it does. Anyway, if the Bishop is complaining, you can be sure he's taking no chance on being overheard."

He drew Davis' attention to the well.

"That's a good well, and the water's very sweet. But all the same I don't like the sight of it. They used this house, you see, the Japanese, and just before they left they went crazy, chopping people up and throwing them down the well. Being a neutral, of course, I was not molested. In a manner of speaking, that is; I was by their peculiar logic an 'enemy neutral.' Anyway, the day they left I came down here to inspect the property, and there sitting in the well on top of the pile of corpses were two old crones, one of our people and an old Buddhist. And were they having at each other, hammer and tongs, each trying to convert the other. And both

half-dead, with the blood pouring from them in rivers." He shook his head with a look of wonder, and clamped his pipe between his teeth. "Oh, it was a terrible sight. You can't imagine."

"Who won?"

The Priest sighed. "We moved them to the hospital. The Christian died in a day or two, but the pagan got better. And she's still a pagan." Then, as an afterthought: "She sends me a bottle of wine every Chinese New Year's."

From the yard they moved to the servant quarters and then to the house, and all the time Father Fogarty barely paused for breath. Like most lonely missionaries, once he had a chance to use his native tongue, the words poured out in a rush.

At the gate he switched suddenly from the house to the war. "I hear there are just a thousand Japs at Wuchuan. It's pitiful. General Huang—the hero of Nanking, they call him, which is a grand name considering the terrible defeat it was—he was telling me the Chinese withdrew only after the Japanese brought up their big guns. But he said the Japs lost two thousand men."

Davis laughed. "It's a good story."

"I thought so. But you know it's a curious thing. There's Mr. Lu, the Postal Commissioner. And a good Catholic, too. But he was saying, at least they kept the Reds out. And between themselves I hear the Military are talking the same thing. They're secretly pleased at the situation, would you believe it? It's not that they love the Japs, it's that they hate the Reds." He gave Davis a quick glance of inquiry. "Do you read history at all? Because if you do, you'll recall how the Iron Duke held off the French till Blucher came up with his Germans to deliver the *coup de grace*, as they say. There's quite a similarity." He chuckled pleasantly. "It's comic, you know."

"It's comic," said Davis, "and depressing."

Father Fogarty eyed him curiously a moment. "You shouldn't take it so hard," he said. "I've lived in this wretched country for thirty years, and it makes no difference who's in charge. The people always suffer. It's only in trying to guide them in the way of Christianity that there's any hope. They're like children, you know. You have to take them by the hand."

"Perhaps that's not the only way. The Communists seem to have

done a little in the way of land reform; and if they can do it why can't the Government?"

The other's smile remained unperturbed. "You talk well for an American," he said, "but you miss the point. The Reds aren't in power, and that's the point. Give them ten years on the throne and they'll be as black as the Kuomintang. It's always the same. You'll just ruin your health if you get sentimental about China. In China nothing ever changes, and I suspect it's true the world over. Back in Twenty-seven, when the Kuomintang was new, they had a people's parade down through the streets. It was thirty miles long, and took two days. The end of misery, the end of poverty, the people's principles forever, throw out the foreigners! Oh, it was a sight. And now I suppose you'd tell me they're oppressing the people. And in Twenty-seven I could have told you how it would be. Just read your history. It was the same with the Chin Dynasty in Two-twenty B. C., it was the same with the Manchus forty years ago, today it's the Kuomintang and tomorrow—tomorrow perhaps it will be the Reds."

His smile broadened. "I can see you are not convinced. But do you mind if I point out that even in your great democracy, you will find the same barbarism you do over here. I was there once, and they even robbed me of ten dollars for the privilege of putting my feet on that free and holy soil."

"Of course, it's expensive," Davis interrupted. "Look at the Irish politicians we have running the place."

The other chuckled. "I see you've got a little of the true blood yourself. But I suspect it's been watered too thin. Come over to the Mission tonight and I'll instruct you further. We'll have some wine. It'll loosen you up a bit."

And with a vigorous handshake he waddled jauntily away.

At the Mission that evening Davis was ushered into a small cluttered parlor, piled high with books and smelling of tobacco. As he entered, two men, dressed in khaki like himself, stood up, Father Fogarty between them.

"Here he is. Here he is," said the Priest, half a dozen times over; and he poured Davis a cup of wine. "Likely you'll find it too quiet, but it's the best in the county."

The single oil lamp had a dark shade and the faces of the other

two men were caught in its shadow. The taller bent forward, shook hands and said his name was Beasley. As he turned to the second, the man laughed. "Hi, Captain," he said, and Davis saw it was Nielsen.

Beasley, who had been staring at Davis, now caught his eye. "You're name's Russell? Is it Captain Davis Russell?" Davis said it was. "Well, I have some mail for you. Quite a lot of it. I'll send it over when I get home."

Beasley, it appeared, was fresh from West China. "He has no wild ideas," said Father Fogarty happily. "I'm educating him right from the start."

Listening to the talk, and to Beasley's questions—he was a lieutenant in the Navy—Davis smiled. It was plain to him, and he could see that the Priest understood as well, that Lieutenant Beasley was an intelligence officer. It was curious how easy it was to spot.

He said nothing, however. The Lieutenant seemed a good sort, and Davis had no wish to embarrass him; but he was curious about one thing, and when the Priest was called from the room by a servant, he turned to Beasley.

"Where did you pick up my mail?" he asked, "In Chungking or at Field Headquarters?"

"Back in Chungking. They were just holding it. They think the Japs are going to take over out here. I was all set to parachute, but of course there weren't any Japs within miles."

Davis laughed. "That's Chungking. They're always two months behind. But the thing I was really curious about, did you meet anyone there by the name of Crump?"

"Oh, sure," said Beasley. "He was the one who gave me your mail. He's also the one who thinks something is going to explode out here. But if you ask me—" he paused and looked at Davis a little anxiously—"I hope he's not a friend of yours."

"Not exactly," said Davis; and Nielsen laughed.

"Well, I think he's all wrong. Everything seems very quiet except for the Reds and this Jap rice raid at Wuchuan."

Davis nodded vaguely, then smiled. "How's old Major Crump?"

"Oh, he's fine. It's not Major, he's a Lieutenant Colonel."

Davis only stared, but Nielsen laughed again. "I told you, Cap-

tain, I told you."

"He's supposed to be the last word on conditions in East China. He's going to be operations chief, at least for everything south of the Yangtze. Big shot." Beasley seemed amused. "If you ask him anything about East China, he'll tell you in fifty thousand words. And, gosh, he scared the pants off me. He seemed to think I was throwing my life away, and when he said goodbye he shook hands as if I were being led off to a firing squad. I suppose it's because he had a bad time out here. I understand he walked in behind the lines and rescued a pilot the Japs captured. I believe he was decorated for it. I know he was decorated for doing something out here."

"You see?" said Nielsen, spluttering with suppressed mirth. "You see, Captain? Goddam it, you just can't win. You can't win."

"All I ask," said Davis, "is that he let me alone."

At this point the Priest reappeared.

"Can you imagine it?" he said. "A woman two days gone in labor, and only now they want me to take her into the hospital. And bothering me at this time of night when they should have told me yesterday morning. It's a disgrace."

And the talk turned to other fields, the Priest continuing with the "education" of Lieutenant Beasley.

When Davis got home that night he found a pile of radio messages on his desk, two from Crump. As Beasley had predicted, Crump was now in charge of operations for the area. Crump said things would soon begin to hum, that he would do the dirty work, just tell him what they needed and he, Crump, would see they got it. Nothing was too good for his boys. Those were his words: "Nothing is too good for my boys."

The door opened and George poked his head in the room.

"It's just about the radio. I can't get Shanghai," he said.

"Well, if you can't get it, we'll just have to unpack the big set."

"I'll do it in the morning," said George and withdrew.

It was just as well. From all indications it would be a long time before they saw Wuchuan again. Perhaps never. He yawned and stood up. Shutting the desk drawer, he shook his head—*Colonel Crump!* That really hurt.

The mail Beasley promised failed to arrive till the morning.

There was, as Beasley had said, quite a lot of it. And he stared down at the pile on his desk as if looking at some ancient treasure. He tried to recall—certainly there had been no mail since the middle of September.

Among the letters were four from his wife. He hesitated a moment before he slit the envelopes with the uneasy feeling that somehow she might have discovered what had happened. But they were no different from her other letters, the usual brisk gossip. She had read somewhere that what the boys overseas wanted were not grim prayers for their safety but cheerful little details of life at home. She followed the formula with exactitude, and Davis found it a little boring. But several remarks bothered him, nevertheless. She had met a man who knew a colonel in Washington who said that "you are in a very remote part of China but are doing a perfectly marvelous job. Of course, I knew you were but naturally my bosom swelled with pride." At another point she said she had "redone" his study. She wouldn't tell him what, it would be a surprise.

Little things, but their very littleness, perhaps, made them cut all the more sharply. Now that he knew he could not go back to Robin Hill, he had to write her as soon as possible. His behavior was cruel enough without prolonging the deception. But as he sat there, trying to think what he might say, wondering why he had not said it sooner, words formed and dissolved, reformed but dissolved again.

Some time later there was a knock at the door and Lieutenant Beasley came into the room. Davis, who was still staring blankly into space, turned with a start.

"Oh—Beasley," he said. "Come on in." Shoving the letters in a drawer, he rose and drew up a chair, relieved at the interruption. "What can we do for you?"

"Nothing much. I just wondered if you were going to this dinner."

"What dinner?" Then he remembered. "Oh, yes, General Huang. Yes, I've got to go."

He did not want to go. This dinner, he could see, would be the first step in weaving the web of control about him. But he knew he had to go; it would have been worse to have refused.

He looked at his watch, and swore softly. "It's time now." And taking his hat from the back of his chair, he walked slowly to the door.

The headquarters of General Huang stood at the head of a small square, an imposing pile of buildings that had once been a Confucian Temple. Equally imposing were the four helmeted guards, with their leather shoes, and well-padded uniforms.

"Very pretty," said Davis. "You ought to see his labor troops."

They were led through several courts to a cheerful well-swept anteroom, with polished blackwood chairs and rich hangings on the papered walls. A table was laid with an assortment of nuts and sweets. And in the center a charcoal brazier of polished brass glowed in friendly fashion, for the day was gray and cold. They were hardly seated when steaming cups of very fragrant tea were placed in their hands by a well-dressed servant. The fire, the tea, the servant, all combined to give the room an air of elegance and comfortable good living while retaining a becoming simplicity.

Whatever the morals of the prosperous, thought Davis, they certainly could employ their prosperity with grace and taste.

A moment later General Huang, followed by a number of other officers, burst into the room. His khaki uniform was without medals or insignia, but was of a rich material and exquisitely neat. His face also had a neatness about it, more properly a refinement. It was very smooth and pink, and very delicately formed, at odds in its youthfulness with his slightly graying hair. It was a face that would have graced a girl but for the wide mobile mouth which displayed very white, very strong teeth. But it was partly this femininity that filled Davis with uneasiness. In General Huang he had always sensed a refinement of cunning which he felt helpless to combat.

Even at the moment General Huang gave something of this impression. In his cordiality, like a musical note too high for the human ear, there seemed a subtlety too fine for comprehension.

When the company were seated, Davis found himself next to a lieutenant general who appeared still in his early forties. He was a lean, vigorous looking man with a keen, handsome face. His eye, Davis noticed, was wandering about the room with a quiet amusement. Just what it was, he couldn't say but immediately, instinc-

tively, he felt drawn to the man as he had to few others he had met in China. So strong was the sensation that it almost embarrassed him.

"Your honorable name is Tso?" he asked in Chinese.

The other turned quickly, and his face lit up with a friendly smile. "Yes, my name is Tso, Tso Ih." His accent had a northern burr.

He was, he explained, in command of the New Thirtieth Army, which had only recently arrived in the area. His troops would proceed to the Chiangkou-Wuchuan sector.

"Do you think you can take it back?" Davis asked. He felt the General would not mind his bluntness.

An amused twinkle came to General Tso's eyes. "As I think the Japanese do not want to stay, I think we can take it back."

"Then you will take General Chien's place."

"Oh, no. General Chien is still the garrison commander."

Davis nodded. The other did not have to say more. General Chien would lose his border defense troops. That made General Tso the new power in the area, and the thought delighted him.

It was a long dinner, but a very pleasant one. The food was excellent; there was a fine bean and mustard broth, Peking duck done to a crisp, a monumental fish, pigeon eggs, a score of other dishes; in the end he lost count. The wine, for a clear spirits, was the best he had ever tasted, very smooth and fragrant but deceptively strong. As soon as he rose from the table he knew he had drunk too much. He seemed to float into the anteroom where tea and fruit awaited them. It was the same out in the cold November air. When he said goodbye to General Huang's secretary, the secretary asked him to call regarding his work. General Huang would do everything possible to cooperate.

"Ah, cooperation," he heard himself reply. "That's it. We must have cooperation."

With General Tso he managed more restraint.

"I hope to welcome you to Wuchuan," he said, "in about two weeks."

"I shall be waiting to receive you," General Tso replied, the amusement in his eye brighter than ever.

To take the edge off the wine he walked over to the Navy head-

quarters with Beasley. His head was clear enough, but his feet seemed queerly light.

The Protestant Mission was crowded with Americans; it was like a West China post, untidy, noisy, full of commotion. There was, he noticed, something physically oppressive about a room full of his own people; they were too big, too beefy, like prize cattle fattened for the market. He could understand the Chinese distaste.

He saw Paul a moment; and the other called after him: "Did you get that list? It's the only one I know about. I'm sure nothing was missing."

"What list?"

"The supply list. Maguire wanted it."

He shrugged his shoulders, "I suppose so. I don't know." And he went on to Beasley's room for a cup of coffee.

It was growing dark when he returned to his own house on Long White Elephant Street. A thin rain was falling, and the streets were wet and depressing. So was the house; dark, gloomy and depressing. As he started up the stairs to his room, a door opened and Maguire's head thrust out.

"Oh, Captain, may I talk to you?"

He invited the other up. There was a quality to Maguire's voice that he recognized. Something was wrong.

"What's the trouble now?" he asked when they were alone, but Maguire did not immediately reply. First, he locked the door, then tiptoed close to Davis, as if some catastrophe might follow should his footsteps be overheard.

"I just want to ask you," he said in a low voice. "Did you leave any radio equipment for those people, Mr. Lin's people?"

"No, of course not."

The other seemed to breathe a little easier. "Then it is not so bad. But the situation is just the same. Last night those people captured Chiangkou and sent a propaganda broadcast thanking the Americans for some radios and some other equipment. They also say they recaptured most of Wuchuan from the Japanese and there is fierce fighting at the West Gate. So it is not clear if they get the equipment at Chiangkou or at Wuchuan. But anyway it is very serious. The military are quite excited."

"Well, it couldn't be our stuff unless it's the jeep. It's probably

something the Navy abandoned."

"No," said Maguire flatly, "I think it is our equipment. You see, George looked everywhere but our big radio is missing. It was in four boxes. But nobody can find it. According to the big list Miss Lee had, Lieutenant Paul took it. But the special list she gave him does not have any of those boxes. Lieutenant Paul gave me this list, so I am sure about it."

Davis had drawn in his breath. It was clear enough what Maguire had in mind. "Yes? Go on."

"I can just think this is very bad. Certainly this must be our set. I did not tell Miss Lee about the list Lieutenant Paul gave me, but it is her writing. It is just like I told you before. I am sure she will do anything to help those people."

"But how could she hide four boxes weighing half a ton, or get them out of the Navy Hostel?"

"No, it is not so hard. Lao Ching told me they were just by the gate, all the boxes. So if she wants, some time she or that small boy can just open the gate and let some men in to take the boxes. Or maybe she did it some other time."

For a moment he said nothing as he worked back over the events of the last days in Wuchuan. Nina had forgotten to send the radio on Maguire's junk; she had admitted as much. And she had mentioned radio equipment as one of the things Mr. Lin wanted. She had also superintended the removal of the supplies Paul had taken. And now there was this list with those boxes omitted. And then, of course, the radio was missing. The more he probed, the worse the picture grew.

At last he jerked his head erect with a little exclamation of annoyance.

"Could you tell Miss Lee I would like to see her. I'd like to see her right away." He stared hard at Maguire, his eyes bitter; as if accusing Maguire and not Nina of causing all the trouble. "And I'd like to see her alone."

CHAPTER XVIII

The Bus to Chiangkou

WHILE Davis was talking to Maguire, Nina was in her bare little room on the top floor taking a bath by the light of a tiny oil lamp. It was just a sponge bath, as the water heating system was inadequate. There was a long mirror in her room, a luxury she had not enjoyed since Shanghai; and she was standing in front of this mirror as she completed the bath, a basin of warm water steaming in a stand at her side. The room was cold and so, after having washed the lower half of her body, she had tied her white silk dressing gown loosely about her, letting the top fall to the floor in disheveled folds. And in that dim light, with her body bare to the hips and the dressing gown swathed about her legs, she presented to the mirror the exotic appearance of a woman of an ancient day, a palace slave or a favorite courtesan.

She seemed pleased with that appearance for, as she drew her washcloth along her arms, she turned this way and that, smiling at the young woman who smiled back at her; the erect head and thick black hair, the ivory breasts, the smooth straight shoulders and the strong hips. Twice she turned sideways and patted her stomach; and each time her smile deepened, as if she thought the smallness of her stomach was something especially to be admired.

She had just picked up a towel when there was a knock at the door.

"Yes," she called, clutching the towel to her breast though the door was locked.

"Captain Russell would like to see you." It was Maguire's voice.

"All right. I will come in a minute," she answered, and quickly finishing with the towel, hurried into her clothes.

She ran down the stairs, buttoning her dress as she ran, and pausing a moment before his door finished the last side button before she knocked.

"Come in," said Davis; and she slid quietly into the room, closing the door behind her and leaning back against it.

"I have something very important to talk about," he said slowly.

"So have I," she murmured. She was still smiling. But he did not see the smile, for he had not bothered to light his lamp. And even if he had lit it, he might not have noticed, for his eyes were disturbed and full of his own thoughts.

"Well," he said quickly, "let's get my problem straightened out first." She made no reply, and he went on more slowly. "Nina, you remember the last night at the Navy Hostel, you promised me that you were doing nothing to hurt my work, nothing to interfere with it."

"Yes, of course." Her voice was puzzled.

"I believed you. And I still want to believe you."

"But you don't believe me," she said at once.

"I don't know," he said unhappily. "Our large radio has never arrived, and we know the Communists have captured one. They broadcast as much; they even thanked us for our gifts—*our* gifts! But I don't care about that so much. We can blame it on the military taking our boat. The real trouble is that we can't get Shanghai on the small set, and Shanghai is our most important station. And just as important—more so to me—is thinking that you may have something to do with this."

"You think it is my fault." She still leaned against the door, looking toward him and away from the window so that the dim light kept her face shadowed.

"I don't know. All I know is that you wanted to leave some radio equipment for the Communists. You were in charge of the moving, and the radio, which I thought Lieutenant Paul took—you have it that way on the big list—has never arrived. Those boxes weren't on the list you gave him, and he says he gave us everything we gave him. Originally, of course, they were supposed to come with Maguire, but you forgot to put them on his junk."

His manner was harsh and unnatural; for having to force himself to make this accusation, his words came out all the more roughly for the very reason that he hated to say them.

"There are so many things, Nina," he went on in a bitter rush. "There was an old letter you received, about sending goods from

North China to this area. It was obviously coded. You're not in business, so what can I think. And then—"

"How did you know about it?" she gasped, panic clear in her voice.

"I can't tell you."

"Oh, this is terrible," she burst out in sudden anguish. "Why do you have to think all these terrible things? Why do you have to think them just now?"

There was a pitiful quality to her anguish that made him wince. For the first time since he had known her, she seemed unable to defend herself. And at that, his heart sank and he could not say a word.

At last with seeming great effort, she calmed herself. "Why do you accuse me before even asking? Maybe Lieutenant Paul lost the boxes. Many things could happen."

"Here's the list," he said. He lit the lamp on his desk, and she came forward uncertainly, as if she didn't want him to see her. Her face was white as chalk, he had never seen it so white. She stared at the crumpled paper, shaking her head. At last she put her hand to her forehead. "Oh, I don't know. I don't know. I think I made two lists. I don't remember." Then she looked away, struggling to remember, her eyes dazed. "I'm sure he took them. I remember the numbers. They were twenty-six to thirty, I think, or twenty-seven." She turned with sudden excitement. "At Chiangkou! Mr. Hsiung said that Paul left some boxes at Chiangkou. Let me call Mr. Hsiung to come."

Davis shook his head. "No, no. It's no use. Paul says he loaded our things into the truck first. Everything we gave him. He left a few things of his own, but no radio."

Her excitement died, and she turned to stare at him, her eyes very wide and very dark against her white skin. "You think I have cheated you," she whispered tightly.

His face was almost as anguished as hers, but there was also a set defiance in it, and a bitter look, as if he were saying: "Why in God's name have you made me do this?"

Aloud he said: "I don't say that, Nina. I'm only asking you."

"What do I matter?" she broke in, her words scarcely audible, but in them was as much bitterness as in his face. "I don't matter

at all! You just like to use me." She paused, struggling helplessly against the tears brimming in her eyes. "Oh, I hate—" she began, then the sobs burst, overwhelming her words. "Why do you—" she sobbed unintelligibly. "—it's hate—" At last, even these fragments were submerged, and she fled from the room.

He listened to the sound of her footsteps as they retreated hurriedly up the stairs to her room, as if he were listening to a bell tolling his own end. They had a final sound.

It was a gloomy evening. She did not appear for dinner. And whenever he looked at Miss Chen, he saw that she avoided his gaze as if reproaching him for making her friend unhappy.

There was a lot of work on his desk and he tried to work at it but without success. His mind kept straying off. There were moments when his own suspicions shocked him, then the pendulum would shift. There was Buttercup's suspicion that night in the fog. He had always said of Buttercup that Buttercup was always right.

He went to bed early, hoping he might sleep but he knew he couldn't. Several times, once angrily, once penitently, he sat up with the resolve to see Nina at once, have the whole thing out. But he got no further than that. At midnight, he did get out of bed, and for two hours forced himself to work; did it with almost savage delight in his own weariness. Sometime after three he finally fell into an uneasy sleep; but when he climbed out of bed at seven, he felt haggard and his head ached.

The others were just finishing breakfast. Nina was not at the table. When he asked Miss Chen about her, Miss Chen said she had gone out.

He had made no plan. He had no idea what to do next. He knew if he could not establish her innocence, he would have to give into pressure from the staff and send her away. Pacing his room after breakfast, he suddenly reached for his raincoat and hat. He knew Paul's story only through Maguire. He could at least check it for himself. Maguire wouldn't lie but he was prejudiced. There might be something—

As he was about to leave his room, Miss Chen came in.

"Miss Lee asked me to give you this letter," she said, her face expressionless. She almost ran once he had taken it.

He stared at the letter morosely. She had gone away, he would

never see her again was his first thought. It was written hastily, not her usual neat writing.

"Dear Captain Russell," it began.

"You think I am a Communist agent. You think I steal things to give to the Communists. If I was only a worker in your office, I would just resign and go away. Is it true? I don't think it is true. So now I must prove to you I am not a Communist. So I arranged last night with Hsiao Lao-pan for a boat which is going to Chiangkou, so I can get the radio from the Communists, or just some evidence. I am sure Mr. Paul left it at Chiangkou.

Nina Lee"

"She's innocent," he thought.

He read the letter again; blew his nose and crammed his hat on his head. It was not necessary to go to Chiangkou; that was damned silly. It was only necessary to see him, talk it out without getting emotional. Then his thought reversed itself; perhaps she had no intention of coming back. On the junk, she had not let him talk about the future. Perhaps she had foreseen that some day it would come to this. . . .

On his way out of the house, he peeked into Miss Chen's office.

"When did Miss Lee go out?" he asked.

"At six o'clock."

"Did she tell you where she was going or when she would come back?"

Miss Chen looked frightened. "She just said she will come back in three days. Hsiao Lao-pan went with her; he told me that."

Out in the street he began to whistle; but the whistling was forced, perhaps more defiant than anything else.

It was dangerous, he thought, to go anywhere near Chiangkou. Not just because of the Communists or the Secret Police, but also because of the Japanese. Some were reported nearby, and all stories spoke of their savagery, of hundreds of people killed, of women assaulted. It was not good to think about. And, though she was intelligent enough, she also took risks; he could have told her it was damned silly!

Paul made it clear that the radio might have gone to Chiangkou after all. A soldier had loaded the truck, and even if the radio had

been there, if not on the list, it would have been left behind.

It was not by any means conclusive evidence of Nina's innocence, but Davis seized on it as such. It mattered little, however, one way or the other. He was no longer worried about the radio, he was worried about Nina. "Chiangkou," he thought, and shook his head. It really was dangerous; it really was damned silly.

After five days had passed with no word from Nina Davis' anxiety began to grow. The military situation, in particular, alarmed him.

News from the field followed a normal pattern; it might even have been foreseen. For a time, the Communists held both Chiangkou and Wuchuan. Then, they suddenly faded back into the mountains to the north, leaving both cities empty. This was the result of an encircling movement by the forces of General Tso Ih, for, on the fifth day, it was announced that Government troops had recaptured Wuchuan and at the same time were engaged in a violent battle with Communist forces northwest of Chiangkou. Chiangkou itself standing in the center of the storm was for a time a deserted town. This might have seemed odd if the Japanese were not still in the area; and when news arrived that they had walked into Chiangkou, it created no stir. Having looted Wuchuan, half the Japanese had gone back to their Lihuang base in the east, while the others moved on to Chiangkou, the Chinese respectfully curving around them.

This situation aroused jubilation at General Huang's headquarters. Not only had the Communists been beaten back but the Japanese, who had intruded vulture-like into the crisis to pick the bones of deserted towns, were now surrounded.

The local newspaper, the *Pingsien Erh Pao*, even went so far as to predict their early annihilation; but like many of the military, the newspaper had its head in the classics and not reality. There was in Chinese military tradition a concept that a surrounded enemy must surrender. The Chinese had always considered, and with practical wisdom, that the actual clash of opposing forces was too ruinous in terms of men and material to make war worthwhile; and so, as in a chess game, had always sought to render the position of the enemy untenable. And the enemy, if surrounded, had always followed the rules. But the Japanese who had

entered Chiangkou were schooled in the more barbaric theories of the West and did not understand their inevitable defeat. They set off down the Ta Kiang in commandeered junks for their own lines in the east. In breaking through the encirclement, they were fired upon not far below Shih-tze Ho, but their heavier armament soon quieted the opposition, and unofficial intelligence informed Davis they suffered few, if any, losses.

Davis received this news just eleven days after Nina had left for Chiangkou. The escape of the Japanese did not interest him, but the news of the Japanese withdrawal from Chiangkou did. And when he found the road to Chiangkou had not been cut, that busses were running again, he immediately bought two tickets, one for himself and one for Ching.

The staff understood the reason for his journey well enough, and were surprised he made no mention of it; it seemed to them, even to Maguire, who suspected she had joined the Communists, only in line of duty that he try to find Nina. But to Davis, it was such a personal thing that he did not think of it as an obligation anyone on the staff had a right to expect. Instead, he told them he was going on a scouting trip, which was true enough. All reports stated that Wuchuan was quiet and returning to normal. There had been considerable looting and some burning, but not as much as expected. From Chiangkou, he hoped to go on by boat to Wuchuan. And, if conditions seemed favorable, he promised to move the office back to Wuchuan. None of them liked Pinghsien, and all hoped for a telephone message calling them home to the Temple.

It was raining the morning he left. He had risen at five, and it was still dark when he set out for the river. A ricksha, piled with luggage, stood at the gate, its wet awnings gleaming faintly in the dim light of its flickering lamp. Ching stood beside it, half-hidden under an enormous umbrella. Davis opened his own, and at once the rain beat noisily on the oiled paper. But neither the beat of the rain, nor the chill, wet air could dampen the release this departure gave his spirits. To be doing something, to find Nina—and he was convinced he would find her—had warmed him beyond the reach of rain and cold. If she were not in Chiangkou, he thought, she would be in Wuchuan. She would be busy reestablishing their work, setting the Temple in order. It would be like her; and she

would present him with some evidence, something to give the lie to his past suspicion.

As he strode down through the dark rain-washed streets, feeling at peace and pleased with the world, the wet gleam on the street stones, on walls and shops, the occasional stumbling figures, complaining aloud of the rain and cold, brought to mind the last days in Wuchuan. But the resemblance did not disturb him; he even enjoyed it. It added an excitement to the excursion and a sense of going home.

At the waterfront Pinghsien showed signs of the coming day. Farmers, hunched in their raincoats of fiber matting, emerged from the darkness with creaking wheelbarrows full of winter vegetables, baskets of eggs, chickens. There was a stir aboard the ships and along the banks, the cries of the boatmen mingling with the creak of the wheelbarrows on the bank above. Through the wet air, the smell of earth and water and burning charcoal penetrated sharply. The eastern sky was at last beginning to pale, so that junk masts rose from the misty gloom like a gaunt dead forest in a ghostly land.

Down on the river they climbed into a large sampan, the ricksha man pulling the ricksha aboard with them. Sitting down on the rail, Davis lit a cigarette. There were six other passengers already in the boat. In the light of his match, he saw that the man next to him was an old soldier. He sat on a battered suitcase, leaning his chin on a cane. His eyes were fixed vacantly on the rail; and his red face, deeply lined, had a sad, brooding look.

"To Chiangkou?" Davis asked cheerily.

The other raised his head. "Yes, to Chiangkou," he said in a deep, hoarse voice, then stared at Davis with the contemplative curiosity of his race.

"You go to Chiangkou?" he asked after a long silence.

"Yes, I go to Chiangkou."

The other nodded, and his chin returned to the cane, as if with that one fact determined, nothing else mattered.

As the boat slid out from shore, the soldier suddenly broke into a fit of coughing that seemed to tear at his very heart. It ended in a little shudder, and after catching his breath, he noisily cleared his throat and spat violently on the floorboards. As his chin came

back slowly to the cane, he turned to Davis and in a sepulchral whisper asked if he were also in the army. Davis said he was, and the old soldier sadly shook his head.

"We eat bitterness," he said. "Your army, our army. It is all the same. We get up in the night, we sit in the rain. We get sick and then we die. It is always the same." And he thrust a hand momentarily into the rain that was now beating down on the oil paper umbrellas with a furious tattoo, all but obliterating the city shore behind them. "But," the old soldier resumed, "it could be worse. There was a time five years ago in Kiangsi. I was hit, hit in the belly. Not a bad wound. But a fever came, the wound grew sick and I had to walk two hundred *li* to a hospital. Mother, what a journey! what a sickness!"

They were bumping into the far shore, and the other passengers rose abruptly, the old soldier among them. As soon as the sampan was secure, they jumped to the bank and rushed off into the murky dawn as if they had all suddenly remembered some new urgent business. Davis and Ching hung back to help the ricksha man get his vehicle safely ashore. Ching was impatient, and Davis restrained him.

"We have an hour," he said.

"Perhaps the bus go early," said Ching skeptically. "Perhaps somebody will take our seat." The Chinese had little faith in their own institutions.

It was a long muddy walk to the bus station and when they reached it, the day was well advanced, as advanced as the low gray clouds would permit. Under the protection of a *porte-cochère* stood the bus. Baggage was already piled on the roof; and though the bus looked full, a clamoring crowd still pressed about the single door. It was a very old bus with a battered black body and wheels that tilted outward, giving the impression of a very tired animal about to sink to its knees under the burden of its own weight.

The rumbling voice of the old soldier dominated the scene. Davis could see him struggling fiercely to crowd through the door, all the while shouting to those about him not to push, that there was plenty of room for everybody.

When Davis finally reached the door, his respect for Ching's skepticism had increased. Two men were sitting alongside the

driver's seat and behind them, as best he could see, there was just a mass of baggage and humanity extending close to the ceiling. His own seat was lost to view behind the driver's on the far side. But, urged on by Ching behind him, he clutched at his hand bag and plunged into the crowd. Crawling on hands and knees, he struggled across the confusion of bodies and baggage, only to find a small child standing in his seat. Next to the child sat a woman, who eyed him with obvious distaste, even malevolence. But he was now in the spirit of the struggle, and sprawling across her lap, he managed to squeeze himself into the narrow space by the window, his legs up in the air. He had the feeling that the child, now behind his back, would squash flat, and he tried to tell the woman, who was complaining vaguely of his intrusion, to take it on her lap; but she made no effort to do so, and in the end it remained standing behind his left shoulder, breathing damply on his neck. Only by working his handbag under his feet he was able to relieve the pressure of the driver's seat on his knees, and wriggling back a little, at last relaxed.

Viewing his position with detached amusement, he now amiably joined the crowd in complaining bitterly of any new intruder.

A moment later, the bus driver, a rakish-looking man with long hair that kept falling in front of his eyes, climbed in the window at the side of his seat, and in another minute, the Diesel motor started with a heavy rumble that sent a shudder through the old bus. A greasy mechanic leaped in the door, and slowly they moved forward, but almost at once, stopped with a jerk. A Military Policeman, who had been standing at the side of the vehicle for some time, as if waiting for this chance to show his authority, had suddenly jumped in front of it, angrily waving them to a halt. He now proceeded in a leisurely manner that irritated Davis to check the passes of all the military. When Davis' turn came, the M.P. had only two questions; his name and the number of his gun.

Davis never could remember the number of his gun, nor could he reach the gun in his cramped position. It was under his raincoat and somewhere at the back of his hip. "You have the number," he said rebelliously. "I have told the *hsien-ping* here six times."

"What is the number?" the M.P. repeated stolidly.

Davis reached out, took the man's pad and wrote out the first

figures that came to his head to an even dozen.

The M.P. saluted. The bus moved forward again, swung round the yard, and hurtled onto the main road.

Almost at once, he was aware of a thin trickle of water dripping down the back of his neck. He pulled the collar of his trench coat tight, but it was no longer waterproof and before long he could feel the dampness seeping through to his shoulder.

He was glad of the open window and the cold wet air that brushed his face. It would have been intolerable otherwise.

The world outside was a misty one of brown fields, and small streams, spattering mud and red banks. The driver, for all his rakish look, drove carefully enough, though the bus itself could not have gone much faster. It creaked and swayed at every corner, its constant vibration broken by occasional and inexplicable shudders.

The old soldier, who with Ching sat right behind him, bent forward after they had been an hour on the way, and tapped his shoulder.

"That gun," he said. "Did you give the *hsien-ping* the right number?"

"No," said Davis.

"I thought not," said the old soldier. "There were too many figures. But it is better that way. I know these *hsien-ping*. They are worthless. I told you about the wound I got in my belly, but there was a worse time. It was in Hupeh. You know the *Hupei Lao*," he muttered darkly. "They have the cunning of Tsao Tsao but no ability. I was once traveling to join a new division. It was in a small city. The *hsien-ping* questioned me about my gun, just as with you, and then examined it. Then one of them began slapping me in a sudden rage. They said I had stolen the gun, and they took it from me and put me in prison. They kept me there for two weeks; it was winter and they bound my naked hands before me, as the Mongols do, and every day they beat me till the blood ran. At night, the blood would freeze in my clothes, and my hands filled with pain. You may wonder why they tortured me. It was quite reasonable. They did this so that I would tell them I had stolen the gun. They had lost money left in their charge, lost it in gambling; and they wanted a confession to keep me quiet when they sold my gun to

cover the amount. But I was stubborn in those days. Then they threatened to execute me, and forced me to witness an execution. It is a strange thing, but some men have no ability except the ability to die. There was one man who was to die, who laughed at the executioner, and told him he knew no more of cutting heads than a dog. And it was true. He had to chop three times at one head before it rolled free of the body. Then this one who laughed stuck a finger in the blood of the dead man, and drew a line on his own neck and said, 'Strike there, you son of a turtle.' And even then the executioner hit his head and not the neck."

"But that is not my story. The seeing of the execution was help from Heaven for there was an officer there who knew me. And in three days, I was released. But when I sought to complain, I found the *hsien-ping* had been changed. They had friends, you see; I could do nothing. It was bitter. But that is the way of life."

Davis followed this story with a sombre, almost sardonic expression. It made him feel uneasy; and the closer the jolting bus drew to Chiangkou, the more impatient he began to grow.

There was also an ache at the back of his spine and his right leg had gone to sleep.

At ten, they stopped at a small town only forty kilometers from Chiangkou, at the edge of the wasteland stretch he had traveled with such forboding the summer before. As the bus door opened, a crowd of people gathered eagerly about it. But ahead of them was a station official, who barred the way and joined the shouts of the passengers in shrieking, "No room! Wait till tomorrow!" though he let three or four squeeze by him.

But on the other side of the bus a second official, for a special consideration, was quietly helping would be travellers through the windows. One of these brushed by Davis and somehow managed to squeeze himself down at the feet of the woman. She complained noisily but he paid no attention and looked about very pleased with himself. A second intruder, finding further progress blocked, stopped in mid-air, and settled down, resting his arms on the back of the driver's seat and his feet on top of Davis'. In this fashion, the bus moved on once more. For a moment, Davis made no protest; the situation was too extraordinary. The man at the feet of the woman grew car-sick and was forced to rely on an oil paper

umbrella, which proved inadequate. The child continued to breathe down his neck, the rain to soak into his shoulder, while the man standing on his feet fairly sat on his nose with every lunge and sway of the bus. He was just raising his voice against this final outrage when a white-haired general across the aisle invited the man to a narrow space on a pile of luggage. "The foreigner is a guest in the country," Davis heard the general murmur. "It is not proper to present yourself to him in this way."

When this last tormentor had gone, the old soldier pushed the child away from Davis' neck and touched him on the shoulder.

"I remember once," he said, "traveling in a bus even more crowded than this. It stopped on a hill above a ferry. At the ferry, several more people climbed aboard. Two of them sat in the driver's seat, and when the ferry came, they would not yield to the driver. He flew into a fury. He was a Hunan man, and his temper was hot. He lost his head, and knocked the blocks from under the wheels. He screamed out: 'Drive it then, drive it yourselves.' And the bus rolled into the river. At least ten people were drowned. It was a strange thing."

A moment later they passed a group of wretched looking men, tied to each other with ropes. They were under heavy guard, and this excited Ching. He thought they were Communist prisoners, but the old soldier shook his head. "They are only conscripts." And the tone of his voice seemed to add: "How else can you draft men for the army?"

But in another moment he was tapping Davis on the shoulder. "Did you see that," he said. Then—"There's another." And he pointed to a naked body by the roadside.

"There are troops ahead," he muttered. He had raised his head, sniffing the air, a gleam in his eyes. Then Davis caught an unpleasant smell, the smell of death and decaying things. "You can always taste it in the air," said the old soldier, "when troops are moving."

In another fifteen minutes they were rumbling by a long column of men. In the rear of the line of march, they were thin, gray-faced, and straggled along in uncertain halting steps; but when the bus passed the head of the column twenty minutes later, the men were vigorous and marched strongly. Davis commented on the disparity,

and the old soldier nodded vehemently.

"It is always the same. Next year, those in the fore will drop back and in two years they will be in the rear. In three or four years, they will be dead. It is always the same. It was the same in my father's time. It will be the same when I am gone."

He spoke with an odd elation in his voice, which surprised Davis, and he turned around to stare at the soldier. There was more than a gleam in the old man's eyes, there was a strange almost feverish glitter.

Soon after the bus had emerged from the mountains above the Wuchuan plain, it rose over a slight rise, rumbled down the far slope and slithered to a stop.

Ahead, for a space of two hundred yards, a small stream had flooded the road. In the distance, where the highway rose slowly from the water, were a knot of people and several trucks. At once, an excited babble arose in the bus. The driver climbed out and ambled to the edge of the intruding water, his hands in his pockets. The old soldier put his head out the window and bellowed in a tremendous voice at a farmer coming toward them through the flood. The farmer shouted back, and the old soldier turned to the rest of the passengers.

"He says it is not too deep, but he has not been as far as the bridge because the water came above his thighs and wet his clothes. He doesn't know about the bridge. Perhaps it is washed away. No one knows."

When the driver returned to the bus, a heated discussion began. Most of the passengers were for taking a chance.

At last the driver tossed back his hair with a careless laugh and climbed into his seat. He shook his hair back a second time and let the bus roll forward.

Davis' hand gripped the side of the window, but he made no move beyond picking up his bag. The water was splashing about the wheels. Then he heard the muffler go under with a gurgling sound. A mixture of black oily smoke and white spray flew over them. He felt his feet get wet, and drew them up to the seat. He could reach out and touch the water. And still they plowed on. The smoke and spray grew thicker. Then he felt the water lapping at the seat of his clothes. In that instant, a single, wild, panic-stricken

shout burst from the passengers; and he thought to himself, quite calmly: "The bridge is gone, now we submerge." Water and smoke were sweeping over them; he could see nothing. Then, as if by magic, the water and smoke were gone and they were churning up a low bank, a crowd by the roadside cheering them on.

Everyone was elated but the old soldier. He shook his head, and tapped Davis on the shoulder. "If there had been no bridge, how many would now be alive?" he asked. He seemed disappointed that there would never be an answer.

It was two o'clock when they reached the Chiangkou Bus Station. Flanked by half a dozen hotels and restaurants, it was almost a town in itself. Two miles away across the flat muddy valley lay the city.

Davis and Ching followed the old soldier into a restaurant, and they ate a bowl of chicken noodles together, the old soldier washing it down with rice spirits, as if drinking so much water. Slowly, his face grew redder still and the gloomy expression he had worn so far disappeared.

"We are lucky," he said. "That mad man might have drowned us all." But he chuckled all the same. "It is something to cross a man, but to cross Heaven is a rare thing. If Heaven strikes, there is nothing to be done. I told you about the suffering I had in Hupeh. That was an evil time, but it was not so bad as the earthquake at Tsining." With this remark his heavy face grew serious again. "That was in Kansu when I was young. I was not in the army then. I was a farmer. My father had his own land, and it was good. I had a wife and two sons. I had a strong house, full of grain. Then Heaven struck. It was like the growling of the sea, and the roar of great fires. The whole earth shook, and the mountains walked. *Shan-tso-liao!* It is the simple truth. The mountains tumbled down and walked across the land. Then they became rivers and flooded the valleys. You cannot believe me, but I can tell you it is the simple truth. I saw it with my eyes." And he pointed to his eyes which were bright and staring. "I was at the farm of a cousin when the mountains moved. It was on a hillside, and his land stood firm, but all about it the hill broke into a flood of stone and dust. Everything moved, the far mountains whirled around us. Then I saw we were

in a great stream of earth that was sweeping down the valley. But when the river stopped, my cousin's land held. There was the field with the grain furrows. There was the house and the two trees; but a full *li* away there was the broken hill where the field and house and trees all had stood only a minute before. When I dared, I rushed to the village, where my father, my wife, my sons, my pigs, all lived; but there was no village, there was only a mountain of rock and earth. It was after that I went away and joined the army. You will not believe it, but it is true. Now I have no old woman, no sons. But that is the way of Heaven. There is nothing to be done about it. *Meiyu jatze.*"

His face was gloomy again, the glitter still haunting his eyes. At last, with a shrug, he stood up; and shouldering his bag, he stamped out into the rain without a further word, nor even a backward look, as if he had forgotten them entirely.

Davis watched him go with a moody expression. "The old man's mad," he said aloud, but he was thinking of Nina and the possibility, now very real to him, that he would never find her. Ching, who was busy stuffing their gear into a wooden-wheeled ricksha, turned once to exclaim: "It is true. In Kansu, at the tenth year of the Republic." He nodded vigorously. "Many people died."

There had been some burning at Chiangkou, so the innkeeper at the bus station had said, but once inside the old wall of the town, the devastation appeared greater than the innkeeper had made out. For a half mile along the city's back wall, there were only empty walls, crumbled tile and blackened timbers. In one ruin, the fire still smoldered, sending up a cloud of steam that hissed above the rustle of the rain. In the air, they could taste the acrid smell of burnt homes. And in the debris, dogs hunted ravenously.

Near the city gate they had entered, against the one remaining wall of a large building, was a covered stand. The counter was stacked with cigarettes. Behind it sat an old woman, calmly knitting, as if life in Chiangkou was all it had ever been, changing but unchanged.

Davis approached her. Where was the Huang Shan Hotel, he asked.

"Just here," said the woman, and pointed to the desolation at

her back. Then he noticed a sign on the wall behind the stand, which bore the characters *Huang Shan Lu Kuan*. Yellow Mountain Hotel.

The day the Japanese burnt it, she was in the country, she said; but she came back the following day when they had gone. She did not know why they had burnt it unless they were angry because the Communists had taken everything away. They were like children, bad children. They needed a whipping. It would be good to shoot them.

Davis smiled and said he thought so, too. He felt suddenly attracted to this calm, unemotional old woman, who was regarding him with such sharp, practical eyes.

"Do you know if the Communists took anything from the hotel?" he asked. "Any boxes?"

She put down her knitting. "Tons of boxes. I never saw so many boxes."

"Do you know if anyone inquired about the boxes? A woman, for instance?"

The woman eyed him curiously. "It is strange you ask that. You are the second to ask about the boxes. Just as you say, a woman asked this question. She was a young woman."

Davis showed his excitement. "Where did she go? What happened to her? Tell me what you know!"

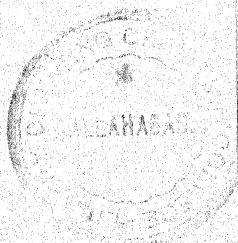
But the old woman shook her head. It was the same day the Communists left. It was close to evening. The next day she came again and searched the hotel. There was a small boy with her. She had lost something, she had said. That same day, some Chinese troops, just a few of them, arrived. Also some civilians. When the young woman came out of the hotel, she met a fat man on the street. He wore a black coat. They talked and then they went away together. She never saw the young woman again.

"The fat man?" Davis asked. "Was he very fat? What was he like?"

He was fat, she said, and he wore a black coat. A fat one, a *pantze*, but not a *ta pan-tze*, not a *great* fat one.

And that was the most she could tell him. He could think of lots of fat men but a fat man in a black coat—he could only think of the ubiquitous Mr. Lin. The rest of the afternoon he searched the

city, inquired at all the hotels, at the Magistrate's office, everywhere ; but no one had seen or heard of Nina. That evening he and Ching found a junk that would take them to Wuchuan in the morning, and there they spent the night. As he sank wearily into his bedding roll, the lap of water at the ship's side, the ship's smell, the hard floor boards, the few faint lights from the city shore brought Nina back so sharply he could almost see her, touch her, could hear her whisper, "*It can't last.*" His eyes grew hot at the thought, and he closed them fiercely. And before he opened them again, he fell asleep.



CHAPTER XIX

General Tso Entertains

THE rain had stopped when dawn came, but the sky was still full of low lying clouds and the air was cold and damp. He shivered out of his bedding, his throat raw and his head choked up. They were late in getting underway, and it was close to noon when Shih-Tze Ho came in sight. Where the Wuchuan Hsiao Ho joined the Ta Kiang, the world was lost in an immensity of swirling yellow water, full of foam and branches of trees and little bundles of straw torn from thatch-roofed huts that had stood too close to the water's edge.

The junk struggled toward a slack stretch of water below the mouth of the Hsiao Ho on the Wuchuan side. In crossing the mouth of the smaller river it seemed the sweep of the angry water would hurl them far down the Ta Kiang. The boatmen broke into a wild chant, straining frenziedly at the oars. The junk shuddered and wallowed in the waves tossed up by the meeting of the two waters. Then, suddenly, the waves were gone and they were sliding into the quiet backwash below the smaller river.

Pushing into the bank, the boatmen made the ship fast, then sat down to eat their morning rice. Seeing this would take time and that the junk had a long, weary pull up the Hsiao Ho to Wuchuan, Davis left Ching with the luggage and jumped ashore. Making his way along the bank and across the paddy paths, he soon reached the motor road.

There were few people on the road, an occasional farmer, some soldiers, and a solitary woman who came running by him, shouting and sobbing, but to what purpose he could not make out. None paid him any attention. In the low, grave-covered hills just west of Wuchuan, he turned off to the river.

Reaching the high bank, he paused. Across the river was the White Cloud Pagoda, as serene as ever. The mountains encircling

the city were hidden in mist and cloud, so that the city seemed in the center of a huge rolling plain. He could barely see the camphor tree that obscured the Temple.

Turning east along the bank he set out toward the city, his eyes on a cluster of straw-roofed huts a half mile away. The water washed within a few feet of them; not even the spring before had he seen it so high. If the jeep was there, he was just in time.

There were more people on the bank than on the road, and the waterfront was lined with shipping as if no calamity had ever befallen the city. He remembered in the south the spring before, a deserted village, sacked and raped; then two weeks later he had passed through, and it was alive with trade, the shops full, the scars of devastation seeming only the scars of time. The very earth of China seemed somehow to absorb calamity, to bury the dead.

As the tea shop came in view he could see it was crowded with people. The doors were wide, and tables filled the entrance. He drew in his breath—yes, it was there, deep in the shadows. He smiled. "What a country!"

When he reached the door, a small man with a large mole on his cheek that sprouted four long hairs, came bouncing out of the shop all smiles and bows.

"Yueh *Hsien-sheng*, you have returned!" And he waved Davis in, calling to a woman in the back. "Look at this. The foreign gentleman has returned."

The shopkeeper thrust a thumb in the air. "*Hai hao!* Still all right!" he said, laughing, and he patted the engine hood.

Seeing the note Nina had left still under the windshield wiper, Davis pulled it away, glanced at the hastily scrawled words and put it in his pocket.

"Has anyone come to see the jeep?" he asked.

"Everybody comes," the shopkeeper laughed. "Business is very good. Everybody is happy to see it. It makes them laugh because the Japanese did not capture it. Now people call this the Shop of the Hiding Jeep. It is a good thing, it has brought good fortune."

"Did anyone come to inquire about it? A woman? Did a woman come?"

The man shook his head. "Nobody knew about it. Not even the *Hsien-fei*. When they saw it, they were surprised and excited; but

after they read the sign, they just went away. Later they came back, and told me to tell you they did not touch it."

Davis nodded vaguely. It had no significance, he told himself; if she had come to satisfy herself that the jeep was safe, it was not necessary that she speak to anyone. Turning to the car, he pressed the catch on the pocket door in the dashboard. There was a flashlight inside, a cheap watch that Major Crump had borrowed, odds and ends. It was good to find that no one had taken anything; it would please Nina. He tried the starter, and the motor turned with a dismal grinding sound but would not catch. The gasoline can had gone to Pinghsien, so with the help of the shopkeeper he put a brazier of hot coals under it, poured hot water in the radiator, piled waste soaked in alcohol about the carburetor and set it ablaze.

Sitting down he accepted a cup of tea. But offering to pay for it, he was refused. Nor would the shopkeeper accept any money for protecting the jeep. But he was unable to resist the watch and the flashlight.

With the engine warm and a dozen hands pushing, the motor soon caught, and with a roar that was echoed by a cheer from the crowd he bounced away along the bank, several boys prancing and whooping along in the mud beside him. He patted the wheel, as if to assure himself of its reality. If only he might have the same luck with Nina, he thought.

He stopped first at the Navy Hostel. As he knocked at the door, he glanced at the gate beyond him, as if he expected to see it still crammed with bodies. But the gate was empty and silent. Then a soldier pulled the door open and peered out, his face blank. When he would have walked in, the man stood in his way and asked for a card.

"Who lives here?" Davis asked, but the soldier shook his head and went away with the card. In a moment a man in officer's uniform but no insignia came to the door, alternately peering at Davis and then at his card. His glance was suspicious.

"You want to see me?" the man asked.

"I want to inquire if a young woman has been here, a woman named Lee? I used to live here before the Japanese came. This woman might have come here. We stayed here with Lieutenant Paul."

"Lieutenant Paul is in Pinghsien," said the other with a show of impatience.

"Yes, I know," said Davis. And he repeated his inquiry.

"There are no women here," the man said at last, and turned abruptly away.

Some of Paul's very, very secret people—he drove off, resentful and annoyed.

The city looked unchanged. But for a few shops still boarded up, it would have been hard to believe the Japanese had ever been near Wuchuan. The pile of dead in the Wall Gate, the smoke they had seen as far away as Chiangkou, the burst of machine-gun fire—it was very hard to believe. If he drove up to the Temple, and found everything as usual—he had crossed the bridge, and now bobbed his head to return the bow of the old shoemaker on the corner; several voices were announcing, "Yueh *Hsien-sheng* has come back!"—if Miss Chen were there decoding, if Ching appeared with his afternoon tea, it would all be perfectly natural. And if Nina . . . if, if, if. . . . He put the jeep in low, and ascended the drive. At the curve he peered ahead excitedly. The gates were wide open, one sagging from a broken hinge. There were no guards at the gatehouse. And yet his excitement still rose; he could feel his hands growing moist. Then the jeep swung into the courtyard. At first glance everything appeared exactly as he had left it—the old pine tree with its sweeping branches, the Pavilion. And yet there was a desolate, long-deserted quality. Then he saw why. There were no windows in the Temple, nor any doors, and debris and filth filled every corner of the court. It had been on his lips to call "Nina!" but now the word faded. In each empty room was the same filth and rubbish, and each had a damp, rancid odor. In the fireplace in the living room were the charred ends of a table, and seeing that he went quickly to Maguire's office. The trap door into the loft was missing; and even from where he stood he could see that the furniture piled there was gone.

A rustling sound startled him, and he turned with "Nina!" again on his lips. But it was only a swallow fluttering along the ceiling. He drew off to the door and with a dart the bird disappeared into the loft.

He walked slowly out to the court and across it to the Pavilion.

Sitting down on the damp stone seat, he lit a cigarette and stared absently down at the city. Though the gray sky was dark there was neither wind nor rain. The day was very quiet, the noises of the river and city reached him only faintly. At the Temple there was no sound at all. In the stillness and the forlorn drooping of the pine branches, the Temple seemed funereal, a tomb, housing only what was dead.

She might, he thought, have gone to the Farmhouse or to a friend, or to a hotel. But somehow, unreasonable or not, he knew, knew with certainty, she was gone and would not come back. Why, or how—there was no answer. She seemed suddenly faded, remote, something that belonged only to the past; more remote than Sarah and Robin Hill. And as he sat there, aware only of that, it seemed that he had really known it all along. That night they had quarreled, her footsteps retreating up the stairs—there had been something final in their beat.

He shook his shoulders to stop a shiver and pulled his trench coat tight, but his eyes remained fixed on the valley below him with the same absent stare.

When he roused himself at last, his face looked worn and old. Getting slowly to his feet, he walked across to the jeep; but before he reached it he turned to the Temple, and stood awhile aimlessly staring into his old office. There were some characters, Japanese he thought, written in chalk on the door frame. He rubbed a hand over them, as if by touching them their meaning might come clear. In a corner of the office, undisturbed by the enemy, were the two stone weights he had once used for exercise. He walked in and picked them up. When at last he dropped them to the floor, they landed with a noisy crash that sent dreary reverberations through the courtyard. He started at the sound, and turning abruptly through the doorway, walked to the jeep. As he backed it up, he glanced at his watch—it was three o'clock, time the junk reached the city—; and shifting the gear, he drove slowly forward down the hill.

Ching and the junk did not arrive till dusk. "It is too terrible," said Ching in his serious and energetic way. "Two times the rope—*huai-le!*" He pulled his hands abruptly apart to show what he

meant. "Too strong, the river, you see."

Davis had no wish to go to the Temple that night. He would have to clean it first, then air it out, get rid of the stench and dampness. Nor did he wish to beg a bed of anyone he knew; he had no wish to see anyone he knew. He felt too numb, too sick at heart. In the end he decided to stay where he was, on the junk. And leaving the jeep on the bank, he settled down for the night. Ching tried to persuade him to go to a restaurant but he refused. He ate the food Ching brought him, and drank some strong wine. It warmed him but did not make him sleepy; and as soon as he was in his bedding roll, his mood unaccountably changed. He wished he had someone to talk to, anyone. It didn't matter who they were or what they talked about.

From under the bamboo matting he could see the north shore of the river, the bridge, the village, the Farmhouse. Few lights showed in the village, but the Farmhouse was ablaze. Every papered window glowed orange and shone again in rippling reflection on the rushing water of the river.

He sat up, the bedding still about him, then with sudden decision climbed out and put on his shoes.

Ching stirred, and looked up questioningly.

"I'm going over to see Mr. Wu," Davis told him. "If I can, I'll telephone Pinghsien . . ." he added in a mumble. Shivering into his trench coat, he dropped to the bank and hurried off into the darkness.

When he reached the Farmhouse, he paused to stare at the back room where Nina and Miss Chen had lived. They were dark, and without bothering to investigate further, he moved on to the front entrance.

As he drew near a voice shouted at him. He stopped and a soldier stepped from the shadows, the light from the open gate gleaming on a bayonet.

Davis moved forward uncertainly. "Is Wu *Hsien-sheng* at home?" he called. The other mumbled unintelligibly in a northern accent, and with his chin beckoned Davis to go ahead. He then bellowed something, which was answered by a loud "Ah!" from inside the compound.

As he entered the gate, another soldier took his card, waved him

to a bench by the gatehouse and retreated into the building behind. "The military," he thought with disappointment; and if there had been no need to telephone, he would not have waited. He would have to talk Chinese, and he was suddenly too tired to make the effort.

He looked up with surprise. Someone had called his name in English.

"Is it Captain Russell?" said an energetic little officer who came bounding forward from the lighted building at the back of the court. Davis squinted. It was a man he had met at General Huang's lunch party.

"General Liu?"

"Yes, yes," said the other delightedly. "Oh, this is very good."

He looked about. "You are alone? No baggage? Never mind. Come in, please. General Tso was expecting you. He told me you might come soon."

"Is General Tso here?" Davis felt suddenly pleased.

"Yes, yes. He is very glad to see you."

But Davis hung back. He was too filthy, he explained; and he told the General the particulars of his arrival.

"No, no," General Liu laughed. "It is no matter. You must come in, and you must stay here. You cannot stay in a boat. It is too dangerous. Someone may rob you. And it is too dirty. No, no." He kept repeating this again and again as if by mere weight of words he hoped to overwhelm any objection Davis might have.

They passed through a second court and through some dark curtains to a warm room where General Tso and another officer sat holding their hands over a small brazier. Both leapt to their feet, and greeted Davis as if he were an old, old friend. They listened attentively to General Liu's story of the Captain's plight, which the Chinese elaborated into such a tale of distress that Davis would have laughed aloud if he had not felt suddenly, inutterably weary, incapable of any emotion whatever.

Without waiting for his acquiescence, General Tso had a sentry dispatched to guard the jeep and warn Ching he would not return till morning. A phone call was put through to Pinghsien to inform Maguire that he should return as soon as possible, and arrangements were made to send a detachment of troops to clean and

repair the Temple as soon as day broke. All this was done with such an energetic bustle, with so many junior officers coming and going, that Davis grew bewildered. It seemed impossible that so much activity in the headquarters of the New Thirtieth Army could concern only him.

He sat silent in the chair they had put him in, a fixed smile on his lips, his eyes moving from one Chinese to another and his head nodding assent to anything they proposed. He felt incapable of anything else. He knew he ought to say something, but their kindness was too overwhelming; and there was this feeling of physical and emotional exhaustion that seemed to rob him of the power to do anything but nod his head and smile, and the smile itself seemed something outside his control.

When at last the activity had died and they were all seated before the brazier, General Tso murmured a few words to General Liu.

"The General says you look cold. Your lips are too white. Would you like some cocoa? The General has a tin of real American cocoa."

And so they had some cocoa, which with much comment and discussion was prepared by all three generals, kneeling on the floor and doing their best to follow the directions on the tin. And still Davis simply stared. It was not till he had finished a cup of the hot drink that he spoke at all.

"You are all Northerners," he said, as if talking to himself. It was pleasant to hear their soft northern accent.

General Liu laughed, and said it was true. Before the war, he said, they had been in the famous Tung Pei Army under Marshal Chang Hsueh-liang.

"Chang Hsueh-liang is now in prison near Kweiyang," said Davis in the same detached way, as if thinking aloud. "I met a Chinese who knew him. He said the Government was afraid of Chang Hsueh-liang, and so he is kept in prison."

General Liu appeared a little startled and spoke softly to General Tso who merely nodded his head. In a moment, however, General Tso laughed and spoke rapidly to his colleague.

"General Tso wants me to say that the cocoa is quite good, but the cooks are very bad. So please excuse us."

"It's very good," said Davis absently, "but Chang Hsueh-liang—it's quite interesting. It seems to me he's the victim of his own patriotism . . ." And warmed by the cocoa, he became as voluble as he had been tongue-tied a moment before, and seemingly as incapable of restraining his thoughts as he had been of forming any. He went on for some time about Marshal Chang, and rather repetitiously, telling them what they knew better than he. Marshal Chang, he said, having tried to bring the warring factions of China together, was now condemned to live out his life in a sort of exile; it was ironic, the price of true patriotism. At last he sighed and a pained, puzzled expression came to his face.

"What amazes me," he said, "is that the Government doesn't realize that the Communists have made their campaign a popular revolt. However good or bad, and maybe they're rotten—I don't know; but they know how to thrive on Government abuses. They're using all of you. Using all the corruption and stink to fatten their own power. So why doesn't the Government, why don't all of you, clean up the corruption instead of all this suicidal bloodshed? Why not do something concrete for the people? Then the Communists will have to stand on their own feet, come out from behind this cloak of popular rebellion against tyranny. It seems so stupid, not only stupid but criminal." A glint had come to his eyes and his voice had risen emotionally. He was both angry and resentful, for he was thinking of Nina, trying to express her point of view, and in these men he saw the forces that had torn her from him. "You're just cutting your own throats. It's just mad, it's . . ."

He paused; and suddenly, as suddenly as if someone had switched on a light, he was aware of the nature of his words, the unfairness—they were not General Chien, General Huang, they were his friends. And slowly his face grew crimson. He felt as if he had awakened from a dream. There before him were his three friends—their faces sober, veiled. Everything was as it had been a moment before, and yet everything seemed changed.

In a momen General Tso bent forward and spoke quietly to General Liu, who had been whispering Davis' remarks.

"General Tso says," the other stated, "that China is in a very bad condition, but just now it is hard to do anything. After the war, of course, it will be necessary to settle all these problems in

some reasonable way. They must be settled or there will be just chaos for years. However, he thanks you for your good advice." Davis drew back in his seat, aware that his cheeks were hotter than ever. There was nothing he could say, his presumption, this silly outburst, was beyond apology. "And also," General Liu continued, "General Tso would like to ask you a question."

"Yes, certainly."

"He wants to know what is the range of the bazooka gun."

There was something a little absurd in the abruptness of the change of subject, but Davis welcomed it too eagerly to notice the absurdity. And in a few minutes the earlier friendly atmosphere was restored. The General was a great believer in artillery. He was full of admiration for a certain battle in France, of which he spoke in curiously technical detail considering his isolation in East China. Employed in the battle was the entire artillery strength of an army corps, some sixty-five battalions which had concentrated on a single objective with such perfect timing that the shells from each battery, from all of the seven hundred and fifty odd guns, had landed at the same instant. And the order had been carried out in the space of a few minutes. That impressed him more than all the great air raids of the war.

At the close of this piece of information Davis stifled a yawn, but he was not able to hide it from the keen eye of General Tso, who at once leapt to his feet.

"You are very tired. You must now go to bed but first let me give you some Fukien tea, then you will sleep like a child."

This was a speciality and the General prepared it himself. He poured boiling water over a porcelain teapot and over the cups, which were very small, then added the tea and poured in the boiling water. He let it sit a moment, then poured out a cup for each of them. It was fragrant and strong. He repeated the process and by the time Davis had taken four cups he felt a warm glow rising through him. All aches and pains seemed to dissolve in that warmth.

They gave him a small room that smelled pleasantly of fresh pine. The silk bedding was beautifully clean and soft, and he sank into it with a delicious sense of physical well-being. Hardly had he blown out the candle by his side when he fell asleep. For a mo-

ment he tossed restlessly, and once he said distinctly, "I'm not going back, so why should you?" Then his words grew less coherent till suddenly he shouted "Nina!" in a cry full of outrage. But after that he grew quieter and sank slowly into deep, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER XX

Old Red Beard's Visitor

ONE morning near the end of February in the year 1945, Captain Davis Russell stood in front of the coal fire in his office and stared out the window at the falling snow. His office was the only room in the Temple where that was possible for no other windows had glass panes. But it was a small luxury, a peephole luxury, because there were just two of them, each no bigger than a book. They were in the front window, and through them he could see a branch of the pine tree, a section of the Pavilion roof, both mantled in white, and the slow fall of the snow.

But miniature though the view was, it was very pleasing, like a winter scene from a Chinese painting with no horizon, just the sweeping pine tree branch balanced by the curving roof of the Pavilion.

Its artistic charm caught his eye and held it, but if anyone had drawn his eye away and asked him what he saw there, he could not have told them. The view was simply a background to his thoughts.

His mind had gone back to the fall, to the end of November, to his "reincarnation" in the Temple, as Mr. Wu Yin called it; and he could see well enough how the change had come about. Not *how*, really, but the change itself. In those three months, it was more than three months now, he had just plodded along doing his work. No one could say that he had not worked. But it was true enough that he had not struggled. The spring and summer before he had always struggled. He had a picture of himself, squirming and twisting and fighting obstacles, but he could see that in these three months there had been no squirming and twisting. And yet, God knew, if squirming had ever done any good, it was in those past three months he had most needed it. But would it have done any good? He thought not. It was even hard to see, viewed with detachment, and that was the only way to view anything, how it had done

any good in the past. It was true, his work had built up slowly but effectively into a fairly presentable enterprise, had reached its fruition in the fall; but that had been inevitable, the inevitable product of hard work; but just as inevitable had been this decline. He had worked just as hard, and yet the decline had ground inexorably on its way. There were forces, natural laws, laws of human conduct, and they were the great despots who marked the patterns. The rise had carried the seed of the decline. As his work had prospered it had crossed other forces; it had to be so. And in doing that it built antagonisms, and placed itself in opposition to still further forces. And all the complex interplay had inevitably decreed this present decline. And so inevitably the decline took place. It was no use to cry out against it. He might as well cry out against the existence of General Chien, half a dozen others; or against Crump being Crump, first upsetting the applecart here in Wuchuan, and then slowly strangling him from West China. That was the Crumpian way; it couldn't be helped.

The room was very still, and a faint crackle from the fire drew his attention. He turned and peered down at the coals, stirred them up a little, then pulled his trousers close so that the heat seared pleasantly through into his legs.

No, he thought, straightening up, there was nothing to cry about even if he had wished to. Losing the Nanking station, for instance. He had known all along that the man was only interested in money; and with the dislocation the Communists had produced in communications, the increasing interference of the officials, and Crump suspiciously denying him new funds—Crump he could see was still bitter about that money-making scheme on the Shanghai exchange, and then Crump judged people by himself—and so it was perfectly in the nature of things that the man should decamp. And so in time with his other agents. And all Crump did was complain. Of course, Crump was interested in the Tunki Post—it was his own baby—and any failure at Wuchuan pushed Tunki up the ladder and brought prestige to Crump. If it had not been for Buttercup in Shanghai, Crump would have recalled him long before. That was why, or he supposed it was, that Crump had chosen Peters to take his place. Peters was a good man, and the one man Buttercup would work for. But he could see that it would all lead

to Tunki. Peters might have orders to set up in Pinghsien, but once he had a firm grip of the Wuchuan strings Crump would move him to Tunki, strings in hand. And then great would be the fame of Tunki, and honored the name of its progenitor, Major—humblest apologies—, Lieutenant Colonel Ernest L. Crump.

However,—and Davis made a gesture with one hand to emphasize the word—Crump and all his manifest chicanery was only one side of the decline and fall of the Temple. It was the Chinese who had delivered the *coup de grace*, and he could not blame them. If he had been in their shoes, he would have done the same thing. All you had to do was add up the evidence.

“Here,” they could say, “is the case. Captain Russell sent a girl, Miss Lee, to the Communist area to rescue a pilot. His friend Major Crump admitted it. Then Major Crump went up to the same area. And why? He said he wished to help in the rescue. But observe. The girl had already rescued the pilot. Obviously, he just wanted to make a connection with the Communists for Captain Russell. After he came back, the Communists made preparations to move south. They have a plan to encircle the Shanghai area, where it is said the Americans will land from the Pacific. They tell Captain Russell they want to arrange with the invasion forces to supply them arms so they can attack the Japanese from the rear. But of course the real reason they want arms is to fight us. Captain Russell may not understand this, but it is perfectly clear to us.

“And so,” they would have gone on, “we saw that Captain Russell had to be watched very closely. When the Communists finally came down from the north, Captain Russell stayed in Wuchuan five days, and this girl stayed with him. No one knows what happened. But it seems quite clear that he was waiting to see the Communists. It was only because the Japanese came to Wuchuan that he left at all. But of course he must have had some contact with the Communists or how could he manage to leave them some important radio equipment? That is very convincing. But what convinces us more is the fact that Miss Lee has disappeared. We did not pay much attention to Miss Lee at first. Captain Russell used her to get the pilot from Changhsing. But now we see Miss Lee was using Captain Russell rather than the reverse. Americans have impractical romantic ideas about women; they think of women

only as women—something delicate and sweet. They like to protect them and touch their soft skin; the action is like wine. And so Miss Lee made a fool of Captain Russell. She shamelessly used her soft body to enslave him. She was the principal force in bringing him close to the Communists. It is quite clear, or why did she disappear when suspicion was aroused against her. Of course, it is all very plain. She ran for her life. And it is well for her she ran when she did, for she is a traitor to China; and if she is discovered, it is certain she will be executed. These are orders from General Huang's headquarters. We all know about it, we of the Army, the Party Police, the Tai Li Investigation Bureau, the Civil Police, and the Garrison headquarters. It is especially traitorous to try to deceive the innocent Americans. She went to Chiangkou, we hear, with a servant, a small boy, then disappeared. Of course. The Communists were in Chiangkou at that time. Where else would she go?

"What can we do? The girl may still have some secret connection with Captain Russell. The best thing to do is to try to get Captain Russell to leave. We will cooperate, but we will tell him nothing. We will discover his agents, and warn them not to be too helpful. We will eliminate any agents who are too 'loyal,' and we will frighten the others. It is unfortunate but it is our patriotic duty. We want to cooperate with the Americans, for they can help us with supplies and equipment; but it is no longer possible with Captain Russell. He is a friend of the Communists, and he knows too much. So we feel the best thing is a change. Someone else should be sent to the area—not Wuchuan, of course; it is too dangerous, too close to the Communists—but Pinghsien where General Huang can keep an eye on him and give him protection."

Davis smiled. And that was just what would happen to Peters; he would become so enmeshed in protection that he would become little more than a puppet of General Huang. Perfectly true. It was all perfectly true, these thoughts of his. They were not what he supposed the officials thought, they were what they thought. Mr. Wu Yin had told him so.

"You see," Mr. Wu had said, "this is what they think. It is useless to fight against it. Their minds are set. If you tell them it is all untrue, they will simply not believe you. That is why I say it would

be wiser to ask your office to remove you to another part of China before your position gets more difficult. It is what they want of course, but what does it matter? You can be more useful somewhere else."

Mr. Wu was right. It was impossible to fight the situation. And so now that he had to go, there was no room for tears. And that he supposed brought him back to this sense of inevitability which had grown up since his return to Wuchuan. It was more than that, a resignation born of a sense of inevitability. There had been no resignation before, but when you saw that no matter what you did, you couldn't overcome obstacles pressing you down, it was hard to keep any enthusiasm. He was, in air corps terminology, "washed up," and the thought of beginning all over again in a strange territory only depressed him. It was true enough; his enthusiasm was dead.

Maguire had noticed that before he had. He had overheard the staff discussing him.

"He is getting a little *fu yeh*," George had complained. *Fu yeh* meant official and therefore not open but given to polite talk that in the end said nothing.

"No," said Maguire, "it is not that so much. He just does his job; if it is all right, then it is all right; if it is not all right, then it cannot be helped."

"*Ta hai hao*," Miss Chen had said. "He is still a nice man."

He smiled remembering that. It was too bad there were not more people like Miss Chen—or Mrs. Hsiung he should say. She would make Maguire a good wife. He wished they hadn't left him. He missed them both. He could also wish Maguire hadn't gone, just to avoid the man he had hired in his place. He didn't like Mr. Hsu; Mr. Hsu was both depressing and inadequate.

There was a knock at the door he recognized, and it creaked open slowly. "Speaking of the devil," Davis thought. A small, impossibly frail little man in a long gray gown slipped into the room and carefully shut the door behind him. The way he shut the door was excessively lady-like. Then, turning, his face wreathed itself in smiles, and he came hurrying toward Davis waving a paper in one hand, his other hand caressing the former as if against the cold.

"Oh, my Captain," he murmured, drawing in his breath and

laughing with nervous politeness. "My Captain is feeling cold I think. So he likes to stand by the fire. It is very good." He extended the paper. "Here is the report. Do you want to see it?"

Davis shook his head. "No, that's all right, Mr. Hsu. Just put it on the desk."

"Yeh, yeh," Mr. Hsu said absently and putting the paper on the desk, he retreated, closing the door with the same care.

Davis' eyes fixed on the door, then his face puckered. "Oh, my Captain, my Captain," he said aloud. It was even sinister, he thought—"on the deck my captain lies, fallen cold and dead."

But of course if Maguire were here right at the moment, the same thing would come up again. That was all part of the inevitability. He still hoped, almost believed, Maguire had acted in perfectly good faith in stirring him up against Nina; but as long as that belief was not complete, as long as the thin line of suspicion held it from completeness, Maguire would sense his resentment and resign. When he came to think of it Maguire had never asked for anything else—only that he be trusted.

It had been a bad blow, losing Maguire and Miss Chen. "We are going to live in Pinghsien," she said, tears in her eyes. "He has some business with Mr. Wang in Shanghai, you know. And when we arrive in Pinghsien we will be married," she added, bursting into tears. The announcement had been strangely forlorn.

With the exception of Mr. Wu Yin, it seemed as if almost everyone he had liked was gone—Nina, Miss Chen, Maguire, Colonel Chao, General Tso. They were all in a way victims of the Situation. General Tso had been ordered by Chungking to clear the way to Shanghai; and he had done that. General Huang had wanted him to go further; to annihilate the Reds, and thus kill two birds with one stone. Or so Mr. Wu Yin put it. One bird was the Reds, the other was General Tso himself. The process would have weakened him, and in the political game that all generals had to play to keep their power General Huang did not like so strong a figure in his area. And so General Tso was at last ordered to withdraw to an unimportant sector in the Poyang Lake region many miles to the west.

Colonel Chao's fate in a way was the same. He had hobnobbed with the New Thirtieth; and as soon as General Chien had re-

gained his power the Colonel was dismissed.

All gone, he thought—all but Mr. Wu. And but for Mr. Wu he would have few regrets in leaving; Mr. Wu, Ching, the Temple itself and possibly George, but principally Mr. Wu. He had found Mr. Wu interested in architecture; and it was that which had done most to ripen their friendship. And if Nina—if Nina had not vanished, that was what he could have done. With Mr. Wu he would have gone into partnership, once the war was done; designing and building, fitting old patterns to new construction. The possibilities were fascinating. But now of course that was impossible. The Inevitable had taken care of that, too.

And it was just as well, he thought, just as well. Back to Chungking, Chungking or Kunming, it didn't matter which, answer Major Crump's "grave charges," and then to work in some obscure desk job till he was sent home or the war ended. One or the other; the end was the same.

He smiled thinking of the "grave charges." When he saw Crump, he should say: "Why, Colonel, you made them possible. Why not answer them yourself?" But Crump would not see the point. He would think only of the incident the military had employed to get him out of the area. "Captain Russell," went the accusation, submitted through the top Chinese authorities in Chungking to His Headquarters, "has been misled by certain sources to enlist cooperation with bandit guerrillas in the border areas, even some Communist bandits. This has made a very bad impression with the local people, who have been terrorized by these bandits; and we beg that he is removed from this area, or we cannot guarantee his safety against the anger of the people."

The incident that had touched this off was ironical. The Navy officer he had met in Pinghsien, Lieutenant Beasley, had wandered into the city one day; and as the Navy had never reestablished their depot in Wuchuan, Beasley had come to him. Beasley had stayed the night and borrowed a million CNC in cash, then gone away to the north, where he blundered into a Communist scouting party which held him prisoner two days.

As the Chinese complaint put it: "Captain Russell even persuaded a young Navy officer to make a trip to the bandit territory and gave him money to do it."

It was ironical that the poor old Navy should have been responsible for his removal because of all the disinterested agencies in East China the Navy had done more for him than any other.

It was ironical, and yet no more ironical than Crump's radio message ordering him back to Chungking. He smiled thinking of it. First Crump had wanted to know if he suspected a Navy plot. And when he wired an indignant "No," his dismissal was the answer. "I can't help feeling you have rather let us down," said Crump.

No doubt, he thought; and it was for the best. Back in Chungking, he would write reports. He would have nothing to do with China. He would be out of harm's way. The more obscure the better. He didn't want to get his fingers burnt and his heart wrung through a wringer again. Then he would be sent home. He'd see about that as soon as possible. He would be forty in April, he was old enough and he had served his time. He would be very happy to get back to Sarah and Robin Hill; and in time this year in Wuchuan would be a remote incident. Time, as it always did, would cover up. *L'eau coule, le coeur oublie*. He might even tell Sarah a little about Nina, not everything, that would only be cruel. He thanked God he had never written he wanted to leave her. Nina had gone just in time.

He turned slowly, picked up the poker and stirred the coals again. As he did so, his eyes lit on a pile of odds and ends on his bed. Turning from the fire he walked into his room, and began packing them meticulously in a wooden box. Peters had not yet arrived, and he planned to stay on at least a week to show him the ropes; but packing was an outlet to his impatience. Now that he was going, he wanted to go. He wanted to get the past into the past.

Picking up a pair of blue pajamas that bore his name, stitched in red, a "posthumous" Christmas present from Nina, he folded them and was about to add them to the things already packed when he paused, studying the blue cloth with a moody air. Then he hunched his shoulders and put them on top of the pile in the box. They were perfectly good, he thought; no need to be melodramatic about mementos. But it was a curious kind of memento; all he had. The thought drew him to all the things Nina had left behind. It was curious she had left so much. It showed, or seemed to, that she had had no intention of leaving just when she did.

Then he shook his head. No use going over all the possibilities again. He had been over them too many times. He knew each path and it always ended in the same spot, a sort of fork in the road leading off into a dark nothingness. If alive, she was with the Communists, and what the officials said of her was substantially true. If dead, then she was dead, she and Hsiao Lao-pan together. There could have been an accident on the river, anything; China hid her dead in oblivion so rapidly that one hardly knew they had lived. In either case, alive or dead, she was dead to him. And there was no use probing further.

But, at any rate, he would keep the pajamas.

A knock sounded at the door, then it banged open. Not Hsu, he thought, nothing lady-like in that.

He drew back his head and peered into the office. It was Ching. He came forward briskly, his eyes smiling. "Oh, it is very," Ching cried excitedly, his words pouring out in a confused babble. "This old man who call you Old Red Beard—he is a farmer of Meihsien. . . . He gives you some important news . . . it is very strange."

Davis rose and limped to the door, one leg asleep.

"Now Ching, what's the trouble? Speak slowly."

Instead, Ching waved to someone standing on the porch, and an old Chinese who might have stepped from a painting came majestically into the room. He had on wooden clogs and a heavily padded gown, and on his head an enormous fur cap, so that he appeared enormously tall. His face was ruddy and his eyes, heavily wrinkled at the corners, had a piercing brightness. On his upper lip was a bristling mustache, which, like his cap and shoulders, was decorated with snow.

"*Yueh Hsien sheng*," he said with a respectful bow, and Davis thought he recognized one of the refugees he had taken to Pinghsien so long before. He spoke with a sonorous dignity that belonged to a past generation; and Davis found he could understand him quite easily in spite of the local country flavor of his words.

The honorable Mr. Yueh had been his friend in distress. Now he had heard a thing which Mr. Yueh would likely wish to know. And so he had come from Meihsien to tell him this thing. It was no way to repay kindness but he hoped Mr. Yueh would forgive him.

In the company on the boat to Pinghsien there was a boy known as the Small Manager. This one was now at a military prison near Meihsien. Through a cousin held at this prison and forced to pay a large fee to avoid conscription, this boy had a story to tell. Now he came to Wuchuan to repeat the story to Old Red Beard.

Small Manager had been arrested in Chiangkou with the woman known as Lee *Hsiao-che*, and thrown into prison. Then everyone went away and the Japanese came. When the Japanese went east from Chiangkou they took with them these two. They went by ship and when they came to a place near Hangchow, they threw Small Manager into the water. When he tried to swim to the ship, a gun was fired, so he swam to the shore. He could not follow the ships, but he thinks they went on to Hangchow.

When he came back, he had a desire to see Old Red Beard, but a strange thing happened. He was questioned by some military guards. They wished to put him in the army, so he told them why he must come back to Wuchuan. Then an officer came to see him and said his case was investigated and it was clear he was only a Border bandit, a *Hsien-fei*, and he would be shot if he did not tell them many things. But he did not know how to answer their questions, so he was kept in the prison in Meihsien and often beaten. Now he was very sick. The air was cold and his clothes thin. So he asked Cousin Ho that he please tell Old Red Beard this story and help him quickly or he cannot live long. There was much more to tell, but he would tell it only to Old Red Beard.

The old farmer had not moved as he spoke, but his eyes and voice did better than gestures; and when he spoke of the military in Meihsien his eyes flashed and his words rolled out with bitter irony.

Nor had Davis moved; he still leaned against the door, though the numbness had long since left his leg. He stared as in a trance, his face deathly pale. For a full minute he did not speak, then he moistened his dry lips.

"We must go," he said in a thin voice. "We must go at once."

CHAPTER XXI

Blood on the Snow

"You think General Chien should know, do you? You think he would feel better about it?" Davis looked up from the jeep, which he and Ching and the coolies and the old farmer were pushing back and forth. Even with gasoline it was balky. His face was red and damp with sweat. Wiping it with the back of his glove, he again smiled at Mr. Hsu. Though his words were smiling, there was yet something biting in them. "Well, Mr. Hsu, why not write him a letter. Tell him we are going to steal one of his prisoners. What do you think about that?"

"Yeh, yeh," said Mr. Hsu absently. That was all he said, but he still looked distressed. Davis turned back to the jeep. When at last it responded with a deep roar, he pulled the old farmer in beside him, pushed Mr. Hsu in the back seat, and with a wave to Ching, drove off down the hill. In his eagerness, he nearly turned the car over in the deep snow at the bottom of the drive, and that sobered him a little.

It was necessary to be cautious, he told himself, cautious all the way. If he approached the military in Meihsien cautiously—there was only a major in charge according to the old farmer—all should go well. He shrugged his shoulders. There would be some red tape but that could be handled later. Hsiao Lao-pan was just a boy.

It might prove no worse a trip than the one of the summer before when he had rushed away so excitedly to "rescue" Nina. It was curious, the similarity—the Meihsien road, a farmer to guide him, a great urgency.

In his excitement he hardly noticed the loveliness of the city. The falling snow gave it the misty quality of Chinese paintings, and the white blanket on roofs and walls hid the scars and dirt and hardship.

The air was sharp and cold, but he hardly felt that either. Nor,

it seemed, did the old farmer sitting stolidly beside him, his face set in a composure that had the dignity of centuries. Mr. Hsu, however, shivered and drew his coat and muffler tighter. He did not understand this venture; and clutching unhappily at the seat in front of him as the jeep slid over the snowy road, he looked cold and miserable and scared to death.

The countryside had a deeper enchantment than the city. The falling snow softened the dark horizon. The white mantle that covered the earth was broken by little streams, their rushing water black as night except where it splashed white down stony sluices. The road to Meihsien was smooth, and as Davis increased his speed, the wind whistled by them and the snow piled against the windshield in a dancing frenzy. But, whenever he paused to wipe it away, an infinite stillness seized the world, and the snow fell with the gentleness of thistle down.

Once he paused at a narrow bridge to let a miserable column of shivering conscripts slip by, their bare hands bound tightly and each roped to another; the feet of several were bare and few of them wore anything but straw sandals. On the other side of the bridge, two had lagged behind, one having slipped exhausted to his hands and knees. Above him, stood an angry guard, warmly dressed, a rifle over his shoulder. Cursing the wretched figure at his feet, he beat him mercilessly with a leather strap. The second conscript, his teeth bared and clenched, strained at the rope that bound him to his comrade like some uncomprehending beast of burden, so that it drew the thin jacket the other wore to his shoulders and cut into the bare flesh of his back, almost as harshly as the blows of the leather strap.

The guard did not hear the jeep, so intent was he on his business; and without pause, Davis drove it into him, then jammed on his brakes. The guard's rifle went up into the air and he catapulted into a snowdrift. At the same time, his victim staggered to his feet with a desperate effort and, casting a quick agonized glance at Davis, stumbled off down the road. Davis watched them gloomily a moment, then drove abreast of the guard who had righted himself but was still sitting in the snow, solemnly brushing it from his clothes. He rose sullenly to his feet as the jeep stopped.

"You should be shot for beating that man," Davis said.

The other made no reply but went on dusting his clothes. Davis stared at him a moment, then drove on. But, as the jeep moved forward, the soldier began to mumble complainingly, his voice rising in proportion to the distance the jeep put between them till he was fairly shouting.

"What's his trouble?" Davis asked.

"He says you hit him on purpose, so he will report you," said Mr. Hsu, and laughed his apologetic laugh. "He called you some naughty names but it is no matter, you see. He is just a rough fellow."

Then the old farmer began to mutter through his mustache. "You have a gun," he growled. "You could have shot him yourself."

Davis now sat hunched over the wheel, a sombre expression on his face. His elation was gone, and he thought only of the worst.

A little later he suddenly laughed aloud, a sardonic little laugh. "Yes, Russell," Crump would say, "getting into trouble with the military. It's no good. I'm rather afraid you're letting me down."

At Meihsien, the old farmer directed him to a house at the far end of the village.

"This is the headquarters," he explained, then pointed on down the road. "The prison is beyond, about one *li*."

There was a guard at the headquarters' door; but he paid Davis no attention, joining the curious, smiling crowd of villagers gathering to examine the jeep.

Inside the building, which was damp and cold, a soldier took his card and led him to a small, dark room with papered windows. In a moment he came back with two cups of hot water.

"Major Ling will come in a minute," he said.

Mr. Hsu sipped the water gratefully and rubbed his cold hands. He still looked frightened. When Major Ling appeared he came at a trot, his hands outstretched.

"Ah, Yueh Shih-li *Hsiang-wei*," he called out. "We meet again!"

Davis looked puzzled, then a light came to his eye, and he shook hands enthusiastically. It was the same little major with the bowed legs and energetic manner he had met at the Shih-Tse Ho ferry in October. He remembered him very well.

"*Ning hao-mo?*" the Major kept repeating—"How are you?"—

as if they were long lost friends. Davis felt a great sense of relief at the discovery. It would make the mission much easier, and he launched at once into the problem.

"Mr. Hsu," he said, "tell Major Ling we are sorry to bother him but want to ask his help on a very important question. In the military prison near here, there is a young boy who used to work for me. His name is Hsiu, 'millet,' though he is called Hsiao Lao-pan. He once helped rescue a pilot from a Communist area, and for this reason, it is believed he is a Communist. But he is only a boy. He knows nothing about Communism. And if he is in trouble, I am to blame. I want very much to talk to him, also to take him back to Wuchuan with me. Tell Major Ling he has nothing to worry about. I will report the case to General Chien. There won't be any trouble."

"Yeh, yeh," murmured Mr. Hsu. "But perhaps he cannot do this."

"That's up to him," said Davis impatiently. "Tell him what I say."

The Major listened attentively, his face screwed up as if by excessive straining he could wring even more information out of Mr. Hsu's words than was there to wring. He kept nodding his head and muttering, "*Hao, hao*. Good, good." And, for a moment, Davis thought they would meet no difficulty.

There was no problem, said Major Ling. Certainly everything could be arranged very easily. There was no problem at all.

Then he screwed up his face again and looked thoughtful. There was only this trouble, he said. He had nothing to do with the prison; he was with the supply corps. He knew nothing of the prisoners; in fact, he had never so much as seen the prison. Captain Eoyang was in charge and had gone to Wuchuan; perhaps it would be better to come back the next day. But, at this point, Major Ling had an inspiration.

"Anyway, it is necessary to get permission from headquarters. I can telephone headquarters, and if they say it is permissible, then it is permissible."

But Davis quickly protested. It was not necessary to do that. He did not wish to disturb Major Ling. He would wait till Captain Eoyang returned and, in the meantime, he would visit the prison

and simply have a talk with the boy.

But Major Ling was insistent that he telephone Wuchuan. It was no trouble, no trouble at all. And Davis had to let him go; there was no possible reason to detain him, other than the obvious one that General Chien's office would say no and insist Davis come to them, and that meant he would never see Hsiao Lao-pan. He began pacing the room, wondering what to do; he was going to be cautious, and now he was stopped before he had even begun.

Just then, the Major returned. The line was busy. There would be a wait of twenty minutes.

"Then, I will come back," said Davis quickly. "It will save time. I have a friend in the car, and I have promised to drive him home. I will be back soon."

And before Major Ling could say a word, he was out of the house and in the jeep.

"I'll come back right away," he called as the Major came hurriedly to the door, a puzzled expression on his face.

"Now," he said to Mr. Hsu, who had sprawled into the back just as the jeep rolled forward, "ask Mr. Ho where the prison is."

"But it is very dangerous," said Mr. Hsu. "First, we must get the permission."

"Please ask him where the prison is!"

The old farmer pointed ahead down the road; and, as they rolled over a low hill a few minutes later, he thrust out his chin at a cluster of buildings, set back from the road in the valley below. There were no windows in the gray outer walls; and though the snow piled about the walls and on the roofs softened the aspect of the place, it yet had the grim appearance of a prison.

Leaving the jeep by the roadside, Davis trudged up through the snow to the single entrance. The day, it seemed, had grown colder, for his breath was more frosty than ever, and he felt the cold in his feet and in his lungs. He brought the old farmer with him but left Mr. Hsu with the jeep. Mr. Hsu, he thought, would only make matters worse. Just as they reached the door, a stocky little sergeant with a pistol strapped to his waist stepped into view. He had a hard pock-marked face, and his small eyes were full of suspicion. He would not be easy to deal with, Davis saw at once.

"We wish to enter," Davis said slowly, pushing into the entrance

beside the man, and waving his credentials stamped with the seal of the Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. Just bully his way in, he thought; it was the best bet. "As you see, I am Yueh Shih-li *Hsiang-wei*. I have permission from Ling *Hsia-chao* to speak to one of the prisoners, a small boy. His name is Hsiu, and he is called Hsiao Lao-pan. Please bring him to see me at once."

"*Pu-tung*," said the man blankly. "Don't understand."

Then the old farmer repeated Davis' explanation. But the soldier stubbornly shook his head, and retreating a little, blocked the passage which led straight to the open courtyard behind. There was a grilled gate at the entrance to the court, but this was open.

It was not possible, said the sergeant bluntly.

Davis pretended irritation and surprise. Major Ling, he explained, had said there would be no difficulty. It was only that he wished to question this boy.

But the sergeant stubbornly stood his ground. The muscles worked contemptuously in his hard face, and he stared straight ahead without glancing at either Davis or the old farmer.

At length, Davis simply looked at the man. Money was the final key, but he should wait, he thought. It would be better if the suggestion came from the sergeant.

"When will Captain Eoyang come back?" he asked.

The sergeant cleared his throat and spat on the floor. "Don't know," he said harshly.

"Then we will wait," said Davis and before anyone could stop him, he stepped into a side room from which several other soldiers had just emerged. It was lined with bunks and on one of these a soldier was asleep, a dirty matting of raw cotton pulled over him. In spite of the cold, the place had a rancid smell. He sat down on one of the bunks, took off his hat and lit a cigarette. In a moment, all the soldiers except the sergeant crowded into the room. They sat silent, their faces blank, their eyes roaming about the room as if unaware of his presence; but whenever he glanced quickly at one, he would find the man's gaze fixed on him with a dull empty stare. At last one smiled and said something in a joking manner to the others that was unintelligible to Davis. Several nodded but their faces remained sober.

"It's very cold," said Davis suddenly and, with a friendly smile,

shook himself and drew his coat tighter. At this remark, all eyes turned on him with a vaguely curious expression.

The sergeant remained standing just outside the door, his hands in his pockets. Beyond him stood the old farmer, his austere face as composed as ever; there was a dignity, a sort of monumental serenity about him that was like the serenity of a mountain. Indeed, with the fringe of snow at the ends of his moustache and on his shoulders and cap, he was like some snow-clad peak, towering awesomely above the rest of them.

"Smoke?" Davis asked the soldiers, and passed his pack around. The one who had joked a moment before, smiled and bobbed his head as he accepted the offer, but the others took the cigarettes without a change in their hard, stolid faces.

"They're American cigarettes. They're stronger than yours," he remarked.

At length one of the soldiers announced in a surprised voice: "He speaks Chinese."

"Not wrong," Davis smiled, and he turned to the one who appeared most friendly. "Where do you come from?" he asked.

"Kiangsi," said the soldier.

"Kiangsi? A Kiangsi 'cousin'?"

The others laughed at the expression, and, as if someone had turned a switch, they were suddenly all talking at once; all but one man near the door, a man with furtive eyes and a scar on his face which twisted his mouth, so that when he smiled his expression was one of extraordinary cruelty and cunning.

With the change in the atmosphere, the sergeant came into the room and sat down by the man with the scar on his face, his eyes on the mud floor. Davis gave him a cigarette and he bobbed his head when he took it, but his face remained unsmiling and his eyes moved only to the cigarette and back to the floor.

At last Davis looked at his watch. "It is too bad," he said to the room at large, "that I have to wait for Captain Eoyang. It would only take a minute to talk to the prisoner. It would make no trouble. No one would know about it. And, of course, I would pay some money. I understand that, of course."

At this remark, the talk stopped, and all eyes again turned on him. Then, the soldier with the scar on his face spoke for the first

time. It was too dangerous, he said. If Captain Eoyang discovered what had been done, they would all suffer. They would lose half their rice.

He spoke in a whining, plaintive voice; and Davis saw it was only a question of how much.

"I know you eat bitterness," he replied, "but I could give you enough money to pay for the rice, and more besides."

The room was silent for a moment; then the sergeant rose, and without a word, walked off down the hall. In a moment, he called out something, and the soldier with the scar grunted, and slipped from the room. A few minutes later, he returned and with a crooked leer invited Davis to follow him.

He led the way to a second door at the end of the hall. As Davis approached it, he could see into an open courtyard. There were only open stalls at each side of the court, but the building at the back was solid. It had a single door held shut by a heavy iron bolt. There were no windows.

The room into which he was ushered was evidently Captain Eoyang's room. It had a bed covered with silk curtains, a flimsy pine wood desk and several chairs. A pair of cracked patent leather boots stood in one corner.

The sergeant paid him no attention but leaned back against the desk, tapping a foot impatiently on the floor, his eyes fixed on the empty wall.

Closing the door surreptitiously, the soldier slid up to Davis so that his face was only a few inches away. He had a stale, unpleasant breath; but whenever Davis drew away, he moved close again.

"We are very poor," he said in a hoarse whine. "It is forbidden for anyone to see the prisoners. But the foreign Prior-born is a good friend. Perhaps we can help him but he must remember we are very poor, we suffer very much. Captain Eoyang is very hard. If the Prior-born—"

But Davis cut him short. "How much?" he asked.

The other, however, only became more servile. It was very difficult to say. It was not a question of money.

"How much?" Davis repeated. Then the sergeant mumbled something Davis did not understand, but it was clear that he was equally impatient.

"Six thousand," said the soldier with an evil grin that drew his crooked lips back over broken yellow teeth and dark gums.

Davis did not wish to bargain. He would have paid all he had with him, which was twice that amount, but he knew if he failed to haggle, they might well delay and press for more before he had a chance to see Hsiao Lao-pan, and there was need to hurry before Major Ling grew suspicious. They settled at last for five thousand, and he paid out half the amount on the spot. Then, the soldier slipped out, telling him to stay where he was; and he would bring the prisoner to the office.

The door had hardly closed when Davis heard an altercation in the hall. It rose quickly. He heard the old farmer's voice suddenly burst into a roar, then the voice of the soldier with the scar, high and shrill, but just as angry, followed by a scuffle and a sound of blows.

The sergeant let out an angry curse and started for the door, but Davis was ahead of him. A few feet down the hall stood the soldier with the scar, viciously jabbing the butt of his rifle into the old man who was being pulled backwards toward the entrance by two other soldiers.

Davis took one step. With one hand, he grabbed at the rifle and with the other seized the soldier's collar, and pulled him back so violently that he staggered out the rear entrance, lost his balance and sprawled full length in the snow of the court. Leaping over the prostrate figure, he ran to the door in the near building. He had ruined his own game, he knew, but he felt pleased all the same. Yanking out the bolt, he hurled the door wide. Behind him he heard confused shouts but a glance showed no one in pursuit. The man in the snow was just sitting up.

He put down the soldier's rifle and walked quickly into the prison. It was dark, and stank of filth and rotting men. There was a long corridor, and to each side pens with wooden bars. In the first pen sat an emaciated little man, dressed only in rags, who rocked back and forth on the floor, his hands over his knees, and his head between them. In another pen, two prisoners shrank away at sight of him, shivering it seemed as much with terror as with cold. Somewhere, someone was breathing with a monotonous, moaning sound. Others babbled at him in low voices. Near the end of the corridor

stood a man with matted hair and a heavy beard. His body was stark naked and shook with cold, but no sound of complaint broke from his lips. Pressed against the wooden bars, he stared at Davis, his mouth wide open, his eyes wild. He gave the impression of having lost control of his muscles in the midst of a scream, his face freezing rigid at that instant. But his wild eyes followed Davis on to the end of the corridor.

The last pen was empty. Hsiao Lao-pan was not there. Davis turned about in sudden fury. "A small boy!" he shouted at the nearest prisoner. "Where is he?"

He turned again. From a dark alcove at the back of the corridor, a score of feet protruded grotesquely. At first glance it appeared that there was nothing more than that line of feet. Some had their toes up, others lay flat, or were twisted out of shape. Then he saw that an old straw matting covered the bodies. He lifted the matting and there, right at his feet, lay Hsiao Lao-pan. He knew him at once, though every bone in his naked body stood out as if only covered with paper, and from his chest, which was a mass of dried blood and broken skin, several bones protruded as if the skin had been too weak to hold them in. His neck was shrunk to a cord, so that his large head looked grotesquely out of proportion. In the dim light, the dead face appeared to be smiling, a strange clenched little smile.

He picked up the little body, which was as cold as ice and had no weight at all, and walked back down the corridor. As he passed the naked prisoner who stood pressed against the bars of his pen, the other's wild eyes fixed on Hsiao Lao-pan, and his expression changed at last, changed to a smile so hideous that Davis shuddered and turned his face away.

At the door he paused. The courtyard was empty, but he could see a knot of men silhouetted in the hallway of the front house. He took a firmer grip of Hsiao Lao-pan and unbuttoned the holster to his pistol. But almost at once he buttoned it again, and moving slowly across the court, walked up the steps and down the hall. They were lined up in the far entrance, each with a rifle in his hand. In front of them stood the sergeant. The sergeant's face was cold and glaring, the muscles working in his cheeks. As he came close, the sergeant put a hand against his chest.

He said nothing. He simply gripped the sergeant's wrist and twisting it mercilessly, moved him aside. The other yielded with a muttered exclamation, his face suddenly contorted with pain.

The first soldiers gave way before the menace in his face but in falling back crowded against those behind so that in the sudden confusion, they could not let him pass whether they wished to or not. He paused, and in that instant someone caught him from behind. He twisted about savagely. There was a metallic clash of rifles. A hand clutched at the boy's body but he knocked it away. A rifle clattered noisily to the floor. Several hands had hold of him; he could feel a hot breath on his neck. He tore one hand away, and with another twist was in the open door. There was the jeep and in the distance the hills. Then a shattering explosion broke into the struggle, and at the same time something hit his leg a terrible crunching blow.

Instantly, as if by magic, the scuffle and shouting stopped, and he found himself sitting in the snow, weak and dazed. Most of the soldiers were still standing in the doorway. One had picked himself up from the snow and was bent over, brushing his clothes. In the doorway, another, the one Davis had thought friendly, was peering in open-mouthed wonder at a thin curl of smoke drifting from the barrel of a gun.

"That's all right," he said, without knowing himself what he meant. "That's all right."

All his anger was gone, he felt only sick and weak and foolish. He raised himself to a sitting position, and stared down at his left leg. It was oddly bent just above the knee, and a pulsing flow of blood was welling out, wine dark on his trousers and crimson on the snow. There was something beautiful in the bright red blood on the pure whiteness of the snow. Then he was aware of Hsiao Lao-pan's body under his arm and tightened his grip.

The next thing he knew, the old farmer, whom he had not seen since the earlier quarrel, was picking him up with surprising strength.

"They wished to trick you," he said. "That was their plan. I heard them talking."

The soldier, who had been staring at the gun, suddenly ran to the farmer's assistance; and between them, he was carried back

to the jeep. His left leg had no feeling at all ; and it seemed to him that the other, through some prank of nature, hurt him more.

In the jeep Mr. Hsu was rubbing his hands in a paroxysm of terror, the more so when Davis gave him Hsiao Lao-pan's body to wrap in the blanket he had been sitting on. But he tied a handkerchief around the wound and helped Davis fasten a tourniquet of old rags.

The thing to do, Davis told himself, was to get home before he lost too much blood and fainted. But he still felt foolish and ashamed, and before he started the jeep, he insisted on writing out a statement that no one was to blame ; there had been a quarrel and it was his fault. He made Hsu write a translation, then he signed it and gave it to the soldier who had carried him to the jeep.

"It would be better to give no letter," growled the farmer. "Then they might be shot."

"No," said Davis. "I am to blame. It was not necessary to steal the body. I am to blame."

"But, why is the body a body?" the farmer muttered. "It is better they are shot."

Davis made no answer. There was none to make. Instead, he started the jeep. He was sitting normally enough, his wounded left leg tied over the side and resting on the front fender ; and by using the hand throttle, he found he could manage well enough. They moved forward slowly. He looked at his watch. It was two-thirty, and they had left Meihsien at two. It seemed much longer. He was half-fearful Major Ling would be waiting at the gate of the military headquarters, but not even the sentry was in sight. Beyond the town he would have stopped to let the farmer go his way, but the other refused. He would see Old Red Beard to the Temple. This wound was not a small thing.

Davis made no objection. He felt too weak. And when they drew near Wuchuan he began to feel dizzy, falling into a strange world, half-real, half-fancy. The snow had stopped, and in the east, the clouds had broken. On the horizon ahead of the winding road the land was now sombre, limitless, lost in winter darkness ; now, like the sudden shift of a picture on a screen, tinted pink with a flood of sunlight, while in the distance, thrusting into a clean blue sky, infinitely clear and cold, mountain crags, dazzling white, rose in

massive grandeur, the topmost peak plumed with a wind-swept cloud of snow. Impossibly remote the mountains looked, like a vision of another and lovelier world.

In the city his mind cleared a little, a throbbing pain that pulsed with the jeep bringing it back to focus on the narrow slushy streets. But when he reached the driveway to the Temple, he felt, quite suddenly, that he could not go on, that he couldn't make the jeep reach the Temple. The Temple was a place isolated, as remote as his dream of Nina, or those mountain peaks, far beyond his reach. It was as if he had to push the jeep up by his own strength, his own will. He gripped the wheel; sweat stood on his forehead. He yanked in the compound clutch; and slowly, easily the jeep rose. It was not so bad. They swung round the turn, and up the last slope. He smiled, grimly. He had made it after all.

Then he stared puzzled. In front of him was another jeep. Was it his jeep, or was this his jeep? And would he soon appear from his own office to welcome whoever he was? He smiled at the absurdity of the thought.

A man with dark hair, thinner but taller than he, was coming toward him from the Temple. Then he remembered.

"Hello, Peters," he said, and his face grew serious. "Before I forget it, you can tell them it was my fault, not Major Ling or anyone else. My fault."

Peters had been smiling but now grew suddenly alarmed. "What's happened?" His voice seemed dark and whirling, unnecessarily loud.

Davis held out a hand. As he did so, a pain raced up through him like a flood to burst in sudden brilliance in his brain. And before Peters could catch him, he toppled headfirst to the ground, his broken leg, tied as it was, twisting unnaturally and the snow quickly turning crimson with his blood.

CHAPTER XXII

News from Hangchow

HE NEVER knew who it might be. He would open his eyes and there was Peters; close them and open them again, and there was George and a strange Chinese doing something to his leg; in another second, it was Ching and Peters again. Whether it was night or day, he did not know. Once he asked to see the mountains—the white mountains and the blue sky—and they said it was night. He asked them what night, and someone said it was the same night, whatever that meant. "It must be Ching," he thought. "No one else could be so enlightening." But he knew where he was; he was in his own room, and there was a fire in the fireplace. . . .

At times, there was no feeling at all, just a numbness. Then again, he would feel pain all through him, pulsing with the beat of his heart, so that he had to clench his fists to keep from crying out.

Nothing seemed definite. He could not remember who had been there. Miss Chen had. He supposed she had. Anyway, it was a woman. . . .

Then, he knew he had been asleep. The river was very quiet, the air on his face cold, and it was daylight. He supposed Ching would give him noodles. He didn't particularly want noodles.

His eyes fastened on a lamp swinging from one of the bamboo ribs that held the matting in place. There were five hundred and twelve uses for bamboo; it was something to think about. The lamp had quite a swing, but the junk didn't seem to be moving. It was curious.

But the noodles. "Ching!" he called.

There was a loud, "Ah!" and Ching's head appeared at the opening beyond his feet. "Are you going to have noodles?"

Ching shook his head. "No noodles."

He nodded approvingly. "Are we moving?"

Ching bobbed his head. "Moving, okay."

Then Peters appeared in the opening. "Well, you're awake. Good boy."

"I'm awake, but I don't know where I am, or what day it is, or nothin'."

Peters laughed. "It's Sunday. Yesterday you broke your leg, and you are on your way to Pinghsien on a de luxe junk, first class, outside cabin."

"It's not very outside. Have you got another pillow? I'd like to see what there is to see."

Peters brought another pillow. "And you can do anything you like. The ship's yours. There's only one rule—you can't move."

"Oh, one thing," said Davis. "No. Two things, I want to write a letter of apology to Major Ling, and I want to get Hsiao Lao-pan decently buried. I want to see he has a proper funeral."

"All arranged," said Peters. "You told me last night."

"I did? Well, did I tell you that I've started you off so well that your chances of failing are practically assured? No, but seriously, that was a crazy thing to do. I'm sorry."

"Okay," Peters smiled. "You're sorry. Now just lie quiet and watch the snow flakes fall."

And that was all he did. That afternoon, his leg began to hurt again, a slow steady pain; and with it came a fever and his mind grew hazy once more.

Once he was driving along a country road with his uncle, dead many years before, a huge man with a red beard, who towered above him as he had when he was a boy. It was no road like any road in Connecticut. There were farmers in the fields and they were Chinese. And soon there were no farmers, and the fields were only arid, eroded wastes rising into red hills on which no grass grew. And on them the sun beat with a shimmering heat. Slowly, the hills moved in on the road till they were riding in a canyon. At last, his uncle stopped to speak to a man standing at the roadside. His head was turned away, but when his uncle asked, "Where does this road take us?" the man turned. His face was familiar and filled Davis with an odd sense of dread. "It leads to Peace," said the man, and smiled horribly. "Peace, Peace!" As they drove on, the man held to the side of the car, running as nimbly as a boy and

waving them ahead. Then, suddenly, they were in an empty desert that had a strange half-light and was full of wind and driving snow. Strange pale faces, that had no color or expression, peered into the car. One was Hsiao Lao-pan, and one was Nina, her face, her lips deadly white, her eyes closed. Then between them came the man who said the road led to Peace. Davis saw now that his face was bearded, his hair long, and pressing close to the window, his lips curved in a hideous smile. Then he knew where he was and clutched at his uncle, but he was too late. His uncle's face was as pale as those pressing in at the windows of the car, even his beard had lost its color; he was dead.

Into the nightmares and confused dreams came lucid moments. Either it was dark, and the dim lit lantern swinging overhead cast shadows that undulated slowly, or a gray light streamed in the opening. Beyond, he could see the river, dark and red, and the countryside lost in snow, which still fell quietly in large gentle flakes. It never stopped. Day in, day out, on and on, it never stopped.

Sometimes he was sharply aware of his leg, and sometimes the pain seemed far off. When the pain was far off, it was at moments when he felt numb all over, and somehow faraway from himself, languorous and detached. It was morphine, he supposed.

The air on his face was always cold. It had a queer taste, a mixture of sulphanilimide, boat smells and cooking.

Once when he opened his eyes, he was certain he saw Nina standing just beyond the opening. He raised his head to call her name, and the heavy quilt over him got in the way; but when he had pressed it down, he saw it was only Ching in his long gown. And the sight made him bitter. It was as if he had sunk back into a dream, and but for the quilt, he might have stayed awake and Nina would have remained a reality.

The ship and the river and the swinging lantern and the falling snow grew less clear and distinct as the days passed. They were there but they grew more and more confused with Robin Hill and the Temple and the Pavilion, and then the moments of clarity vanished completely. One day after what seemed a long, drugging sleep, he opened his eyes in a strange, silent darkness. There was no lantern, no creak of wood, and the air was completely still. It had

a faint mustiness like that of an old house.

Perhaps he was dead, he thought with some amusement, and drawing his hand free of the bed clothes, he felt his leg. It was very large and hard. It puzzled him a moment, then he realized he was in a cast. At that point, he must have fallen asleep again, for when he next opened his eyes, it was daylight.

He was in a large room with a very high ceiling. There was a double door with glass panes which opened on a verandah. And though the sun had not risen, thin pink clouds hung in the blue sky. On a roof across the way, two men were busy clearing away snow with long bamboo poles. At a window by his side, he could see over the compound wall, across snowy fields and little hills full of graves to a line of mountains. They were blue gray in their depths but thin rocky peaks caught the sunlight and glowed pink and white. The air was very clear, and looked still and cold.

It was an austere room. There was a picture of Christ on one wall and a cross above his head. Near the door was a crucifix with a little receptacle for holy water. There was no need to ask where he was.

A little later, the door at the side of the room opened softly, and the bearded face and pink bald head of Father Fogarty poked furtively into the room.

"Hy," said Davis. His own voice sounded strange. It had a thin unnatural quality.

"Well, now," said Father Fogarty, and his round body followed his head into the room. "Well, now." He seemed incapable of saying more but beamed on Davis in the most friendly fashion. "Well, I see you're alive," he added at last, as if it were quite unexpected.

Davis smiled. "Are both bones broken?"

"Broken? They're in ruins! Dr Tang was taking out pieces by the bucket. But if the infection clears up he says you'll mend—and that's a miracle." He smiled happily. "But there's something more important, will you be having some breakfast? There's tea and ham and eggs and toast."

"And an orange?"

The other looked distressed. "An orange with your ham and eggs? It's not even Christian at all." Then he shrugged his shoulders. "It's your own stomach." And the Priest slipped out of the

room to give the order.

He felt stronger after breakfast, and after a bath—what there was of him available for bathing. The little nurse was pretty and efficient; her voice reminded him of Nina's; she had the same soft northern accent, and that was pleasant.

Peters came in to see him later that morning. He was going back to Wuchuan on a bank truck after lunch. Davis had jotted down a long list of things to tell Peters; but now, try as he would, he could not remember more than half a dozen. And that made him all the more disgusted with what he had done.

But when he said as much, Peters only laughed.

"It doesn't affect me," he said. "And in a way, it helps. Can't you see how that works? The officials feel sorry for me, too. And, as a matter of fact, they feel sorry for you. You're leaving anyway; they know that. The accident, so they think, is your fault so they feel perfectly free to feel sorry for you. It's not just Chinese; it's human nature. It was General Chien who gave us the junk."

He was quiet after that. It was ironical, but he could see how it might be.

The Army took a cold view of accidents when the victim was himself to blame and it was worse when it came of a quarrel with an Ally. He had expected charges to be preferred against him and Crump said they would; but Crump's first comment was not expected, though he had to admit it was like Crump all the same. Peters showed him the message Crump had radioed: "Please check if Russell did this on purpose to delay his return to West China." When Peters explained the whole incident, Crump came right back with another Crumpism. "I told Russell that Wuchuan crowd was no good. I told him to move to Pinghsien. It's his fault getting into this mess. Will try and stop this court martial business but not sure I should. . . ."

Crump, as Davis noted, seemed to take the incident as a personal affront. He seemed to be thinking: "You did this just to spite me." But all Davis cared was that Crump let him alone.

It was early March, three weeks since his accident, and the Wuchuan Post was now a thing of the past. It was the Pinghsien Post. "And it's just as well," said Peters. "The Reds are getting

restless again. They're strengthening their troops in Sanpo."

Davis smiled when he heard that. He did not know why he smiled, perhaps simply because it had all happened before, and when viewed from his position of detachment, there was no other emotion suitable. But he smiled at most things that week as his principal worry had been relieved. For the first two weeks after his arrival in Pinghsien, he had fretted and tossed, lest a truck be sent to haul him away to Kanchow, whence a plane would take him to a Station hospital in West China. Then in due course, he would be invalided home; and any chance of finding Nina, of helping her—and he was certain she desperately needed help—would be lost, probably lost forever.

But his worry had been groundless. The doctor told him he would be fortunate if he left his bed before the middle of June. Then Peters radioed Crump that an attempt to move him over the dirt roads of East China might cripple him for life. Crump accepted this verdict and let the matter rest. As Peters pointed out: "Crump can't use you, anyway, so he doesn't care where you stay."

"Good old Crump," said Davis, and relaxed; and through Peters he sent an agent to Hangchow to hunt Nina. "You have to do that," he said earnestly, as if fearful Peters might refuse. "It's not a personal matter. I, or rather the office, the American Army, got her into this trouble, and we've just got to get her out of it."

"Yes, sir," smiled Peters.

Spring came very suddenly. Almost overnight it seemed. The heavy snow at the end of February, which by its very weight had caved in a hundred Pinghsien roofs, was the last gasp of winter. It was gone in two weeks, and near the end of March a warm rain stole down the valley from the South, so warm that he was able to have the doors to the verandah opened. And in the damp air, he could taste the earth and the first fresh breath of spring.

Then in the space of a week it burst on the land with a rush. There was a plum tree below his window, and it came first. Overnight it grew fragrant with a mass of tiny white blossoms. Then the dark green mountains that only a month before were covered with snow, grew faintly pink and in a few days were on fire with

wild azalea. There were azalea among the grave mounds in the low hills nearby and a new soft green. In the fields, the new rice, almost ready for transplanting, shone in emerald patches, and the rape seed flower flashed a golden imperial yellow. Those days were sunny with fleecy clouds almost motionless in the sky; and a soft west wind that stirred at the window curtains brought with it such a warm and heady fragrance of fresh earth and flower scent that to breathe it filled him with longing and impatience and a sudden hate for himself, his inactivity, his soft weak body and the odor of diseased flesh and medication.

Dr. Tang had sewed up his wound on advice from West China; he had not approved of sewing it up; but, as he said with a laugh: "I don't want to be shot." The mere sending of advice seemed insulting, but Davis felt the more irked by it as he felt Dr. Tang was right. Just a few days before spring burst into bloom, the doctor had been forced to open his leg again to scrape out rotting bits of bone. And Davis felt he was no nearer well than he had been a month before.

One morning when he was in this gloomy mood, there was a soft knock at the door. He called, "Come in," without taking his eyes from the flame colored mountains in the distance. Then a quiet voice he knew well said:

"Yueh Hsien-sheng."

He turned with delight. It was Miss Chen. She looked as fresh as the spring itself, and yet a little pale and thin.

She seemed as glad to see him as he was to see her, and they sat talking for better than an hour. He told her the story of Hsiao Lao-pan and what he knew of Nina. She said she thought she might do something through Maguire. She had not said much of Maguire before, but now she suddenly asked if Davis would be willing to see him. She was worried about him. He was not well, she thought. If Davis would only talk to him . . .

This request struck him as very surprising, and his mind kept returning to it all that day. It had not occurred to him he could help anybody, nor that anyone would want his help. But he also found it very satisfying; and pursuing the thought further decided he might be useful, or at least busy, in other ways as well.

One evening, Father Fogarty brought in a number of students

from the senior class of the Middle School, and in talking to them, Davis thought them remarkable in their extreme concern for their country and their complete confusion as to what to do about it. He was far from unconfused himself, but he thought he saw clarity on some points where they were at sea. He asked them to come back, and so began a weekly discussion, intensely earnest, which he greatly enjoyed. They thought his country a Utopia, and he did his best to disabuse them of that idea. Their plan for post-war China was wonderfully chimerical; and he did his best to show them that they could only hope for a very slow change at best. They thought by copying American techniques that prosperity would come to the land, and were incapable of seeing, because they had no background for it, that techniques were useless unless the nature of the society they were nurtured in suited them. The traditional social ethics of Confucius, he argued, could not coexist with the western concept of a modern state; and it was questionable, he thought, whether that concept was a step forward or a step backward.

These evenings were regarded by Father Fogarty with amused skepticism. "It's nice talk," he said, "but if you come back in ten years, they'll all be looking after their families at the expense of society, and society will be praising them for doing it. It's a paradox but there it is; they can't resist it."

But Davis did not care. He felt he was doing the boys no harm, and he knew they were doing him no end of good.

Davis also found he could help Peters. Peters was building up a new agent net, and Davis assisted him in the tedious job of instructing the raw recruits.

He also functioned as a sort of older statesman.

"Regarding agents," he would advise his successor. "You have to compromise. There's no other choice. You haven't time to find and train really good men. You should never expect more than a thirty per cent success. You can't do better than that. Only the British can do better. And when you get your agents, don't be misled by patriots. There are three types—the professional, the man with connections and the patriot. The nicest, the cheapest but the poorest is the patriot, as a rule. The most expensive, the most unscrupulous and the best is the professional. But he'll cut your

throat as quickly if you pay him too much as if you pay him too little. Jimmy Wang's both professional and reasonably patriotic, and he has connections. But, don't hope to find another like him; you won't."

Regarding agents he was on pretty solid ground but when he generalized, he was not so sure of himself.

"In general," he once lectured, "let me say, if you get excited by the troubles of the country, you simply get excited. Nobody else will give a damn if you're outraged or do anything about it. Our work rarely attracts virtue, and in a country so mediaeval, so poor and overpopulated, you have to expect the worst—cruelty, stupidity, the crassest self-interest."

It amused him when he reflected on such speeches, as he could see that Peters went about his work with extraordinary coolness, much more coolly than he ever had; and this in spite of increasing interference by General Huang. It was he, not Peters, who needed such counsel, and sometimes he suspected that Peters let him ramble on because he thought it good mental therapy.

This new activity made April and May satisfactory months. It was good to feel he had some existence on the credit side of life; and but for the uncertainty about Nina, they might have been happy months. His nerves stayed on edge, however, and he was aware of it because his protection against his own emotions was so thin. People were too kind to him, he thought; he deserved no such kindness and he wished they were less so because they only embarrassed him. He knew he had made a mess of things, and they had no business telling him he hadn't.

In particular, the Chinese were too kind. When his fortieth birthday came in early May, he let it pass unnoticed, afraid of the fuss he knew the Chinese would make over it. But that night, Ching and the Temple servants appeared, dressed in their holiday best, and presented him with a silver cup, inscribed with their names and wishing him long life. Ching made a speech.

"After the war," he said, "people say you will come back to China. If it is true, we like to work for you. Okay?"

"Of course," said Davis, and to hide his feelings, cleared his throat unnecessarily and joked about the amount of wine he could drink with such a cup.

Mr. Wu came all the way from Tunglu to see him, a two day trip each way. General Tso sent a dozen bottles of wine from Tunki. General Huang and even General Chien sent presents, together with letters full of sympathy and praise for his "splendid work, and always patriotic cooperation." He smiled sardonically at that; in their case he could only feel bitterly amused.

Another surprise visitor, bearing tea and bananas from Fukien, was Colonel Chao.

He was now an instructor in the New Youth Army, he explained. The New Youth Army was a curious phenomenon. It was an eleventh hour attempt by the Government to draw the educated youth of the country into service; but the effort was proving anything but happy. The New Youth were arrogant and unruly, they insulted their officers, started riots, and scared the Army to death. But even with their arrogance and hooliganism, they gave one an insight into what the people would demand of their more inept leaders once they had some education. The man on top might still be a villain but he would have to be an able villain.

Colonel Chao had come into the room all smiles and bounce.

"Captain," he had announced happily. "It is too bad for your destruction of the leg."

But when Davis mentioned the New Youth Army, Colonel Chao's bounce disappeared and his face fell into a gloom that was free of all pretense.

"It is too bad," he said unhappily. "Every time I give instructions always there is some shouting voices and some whistling sound. It is too bad, I think."

At heart, in spite of his irritations, Davis had always felt sorry for Colonel Chao. Now he felt more sorry than ever. The little Colonel tried so very hard to be something he never could be, a competent officer. And smile and shout and jump as energetically as he would, he had no future. And underneath the surface show, Davis thought he knew it.

One person Davis had expected to see was Mr. Tien, but Mr. Tien never appeared. Nor could anyone give him any information about Mr. Tien until Mr. Wu arrived. With the Communists firmly anchored in Wuchuan and that route to Shanghai blocked, Mr. Tien had moved his office south to Tunglu and since then had gone

away on a special business mission. Mr. Wu said he supposed that Mr. Tien had gone to Shanghai but he would not say why he supposed that. An implication that Mr. Tien's travels were something dark and not to be questioned was left hanging in the air. And it amused Davis, thinking back. Of all the Chinese officials in Wuchuan he had probably seen more of Mr. Tien, yet he still knew almost nothing about him. He had come to distrust him. Neither Nina nor Maguire had trusted him, and he knew that Mr. Wu did not trust him though he had never openly said so. And yet, none of them had ever explained why, and he wondered if they had any more basis than he for distrusting Mr. Tien; it was simply that they didn't like him, he decided, and that was the most anyone could say. And yet there seemed something particularly wrong, even evil, in Mr. Tien going to Shanghai; whereas if anyone else had gone to Shanghai, he would have thought nothing of the sort. After all, business over the border, even with the Japanese, was openly admitted; those in it even thought of themselves as patriots, getting the better of the enemy in exchange of goods, which was, no doubt, true; that they also made millions in the trade was no one's business but their own. But, as for Mr. Tien—well, there was something unpleasant about the man, and that was the most anyone could say.

There was another expected visitor who did show up, but not as soon as expected. That was Maguire. Every time Miss Chen came to see him, she said Maguire was not feeling well, and would come the next time. But on a warm afternoon at the end of May, he finally appeared, stalking abruptly into the room without knocking. He looked exactly the same. There was no trace of illness that Davis could remark; the same lean, cadaverous Maguire, his sallow cheeks slightly burned by the sun, so that, if anything, he appeared a little healthier than when he left the Temple. His manner was at once shy and brusque. It seemed as if he had forced himself to come, as if it were an ordeal. And seeing that, Davis tried hard to be more than friendly. He said he wished Maguire would come back to his old job. Both he and Peters would be delighted.

Maguire, who had been nervously running a finger down his long nose and fussing with a cigarette, peering at it the while as if it were an object of new and exciting interest, finally blurted out:

"You don't have to say anything to make me feel better. I am the one to say it." He looked up at last, staring hard at Davis. "It is just my mistake. But I found it too late. You will not believe it, but I sat in Pinghsien and heard about your office in Wuchuan, everything going bad to worse, and I worry about it all the time. Then I hear about the accident."

"It was my fault," Davis said quickly.

"But, if I was there, I could arrange something more smoothly."

Davis smiled. He might have arranged something more smoothly himself.

"So I am very troubled to hear about you, and then it was worse because I find out about Miss Lee."

A shadow passed over Davis' face. "Find out what?" he asked.

"About the equipment. It was suspected Miss Lee gave it to the Communists. But you see, I saw this Mr. Lin. You remember Mr. Lin? I talked to him a long time and I found out the equipment was really at Chiangkou. So I suppose Lieutenant Paul left it there by mistake."

"Well, that's all over," said Davis. "How about coming back to work? You've had enough of a vacation, sitting back coining money like all the other profiteers."

But Maguire waved a restraining hand.

"Yes, yes. It's all right," he said with some impatience. "I will help Captain Peters. But I want to tell you something more. I try very hard to find some news for you about Miss Lee. I did not want to see you till I found out something. And now I have some news for you. She is some place in Hangchow. I find out someone saw her name at a Japanese hospital, and it is the right description. What was the matter nobody can tell, but she only stayed there three days."

"When was it?" Davis burst out, the agitation back in his face.

"About the 15th of May, only two weeks before."

That night Davis lay awake till dawn. And all through the hot month of June, though his days were satisfying, alone in the dark of the night, nights that were hot and sweaty, he grew unbearably restless and sick at heart. Through April and May, he had come slowly to the conclusion that under any circumstances he was obligated to return to Sarah and Robin Hill. What possible right

had he to leave her, he argued, whether he found Nina or not? He had made a contract, and if breaking it hurt her, then it was morally impossible to break it. That fact was inescapable. If he ever found Nina—and he had to try—it would be only to repay her as best he could for whatever she had suffered.

But now, night after night, as he lay sweating in his bed, he could no longer bring himself to support this resolve. He could see that he had never quite swung back to the belief that he might see her again, or even that she was alive. But now the misty, only half-real image, was real again. And before that image the carefully constructed moral edifice that was to carry him back to Robin Hill strained and crumbled.

But as June passed and there was no further word of Nina, he moved back halfway toward his decision to return to Sarah. That was as far as he could go, however, and his indecision made him all the more restless and depressed.

And so the summer wore on, and in the hot steaming nights, he peered out at the moon-drenched land and the vague mountain mass on the horizon, listened to the *tap, tap, tap* of the night watch, drew in the scent of the wisteria below his window, fretted and scratched at his withered leg and cursed his fate.

August came and at last he was out of bed. At the end of June, a Navy doctor had passed through, and he and Dr. Tang had consulted together. Each time before when Dr. Tang had sewed up his leg, a fresh discharge had oozed out beneath the scab, and he had been forced to open the wound and begin again. The Navy doctor agreed with Dr. Tang that he might leave the wound open and let it heal from the inside, and so it was that by August he was out of bed. His first trip across the room left him dizzy and exhausted, but in a week he was getting about on crutches tolerably well. His leg was very stiff, and there was a point beyond which it would not bend. It was as if a bone were in the way. Dr. Tang said it might always be stiff, and he had a premonition the doctor was right.

On the night they first heard the News, he was sitting on the verandah with Father Fogarty. They had been listening to the radio all day, they knew the eerie story of the atom bomb, they

knew of the Russian attack in the north, they had heard rumors for three days; but even so, the end came as a surprise. A rocket flare from the Navy Mission was the first announcement, then the streets slowly filled with shouts and the rolling burst of fire-crackers. Davis felt almost no elation. It was too hard to grasp. He could only sit and smile foolishly at Father Fogarty, who with greater presence of mind poured out another glass of wine.

The days that followed were exasperating, full of rumors and conflicting orders. Peters had been preparing to move to Tunki—Crump's plan; but such plans had no meaning any more. It was sometimes hard to understand that, said Peters; he had to think twice.

Then, at last, they had definite instructions to proceed to Shanghai, but it was not till September that they got away. Davis spent his last week with Peters; and sight of his old furniture, his old files being packed or burned, filled him with a vague regret; but whether it was a nostalgia for the past, or regret that he would never have a chance to show he might do better, he did not know. He did not think about it; he only felt it—a vague regret.

But he still had his worries. They focussed on his leg, which had begun to hurt again and was slightly inflamed. Dr. Tang shook his head and suggested that he wait a little longer. But he wouldn't listen to the doctor. They were only three and a half days by junk from Hangchow—Wuchuan was clear again—and it was only half a day from Hangchow to Shanghai by train. There were hospitals in both cities. But in his mind he thought only of Hangchow. It did not matter what happened to his leg as long as he reached Hangchow.

CHAPTER XXIII

Number Six Stone Horse Road

It was soupy all the way and he did not see the city below him till they were almost on top of it. He would not have seen it, anyway, for he was lost in his own thoughts, lost in the past. But little complaining noises from the airplane, like the sound of motor horns at a great distance, impinged on his consciousness. The plane was preparing to land.

With an abrupt movement he sat up and strained forward to look out. He must have been dozing. Airplane windows were the damndest things—trying to see anything. The plane was circling. He caught a glimpse of distant mountains—Wuchuan, he thought, hidden away somewhere. Then a lake came into view, then Hangchow itself. It looked gray like the sky, like the earth, distinguishable from neither but for the sharp, angled excrescence of buildings; it was as if the Creator had seized the loose dead skin of the world and pinched it up into those curious pimples and ridges.

The plane flattened and the earth rushed to meet them.

Suddenly, he was excited again, aware of the full significance of the moment. The last time, when he had rushed down so eagerly from Pinghsien, growing sicker with every mile, Hangchow had been only a blur, a nightmare. Now it was real. The roughness of the ground under the wheels was real. It was not a nightmare. And Nina was real, and so was the hope of finding her.

He worked his way to the door and stood waiting impatiently. First, he must find Maguire, he thought; and he rehearsed the address. Then, then . . . then . . .

"But you didn't speak to her?" Davis asked, and pulled at his ears; they still hurt though it was two hours since the plane had landed.

Jimmy Wang shook his head, and stared at Miss Chen who was

moving about the table in the other room, clearing away the remains of lunch.

"No," he said, leaning back in his wicker chair so that it creaked loudly. His face was composed but there was something watchful in it as if he were not expressing his own feelings but was anxious to reflect the tense seriousness of the other.

"No, you see, it was quite dark. I saw her in the pavilion by the lake. I was not sure about it. Then I followed her into the side street. And there was a light in the doorway of this hotel. And when she went in the doorway, then I saw her face because of the light. She doesn't look quite the same, but I know it is Miss Lee."

Davis picked up his tea, nodded, and taking a sip, looked about the room. It was dark; and at the moment he had a fleeting sense of being back in the war; those furtive times when he talked to agents in that gloomy room in the Farmhouse.

"What sort of a place is it?" he asked.

Buttercup shook his head, puckering up his face in a look of distaste. "It is no damn good. Just a cheap place. You can see some other girls there—sing-song girls or something like that. It's no damn good."

Davis nodded again, and looked at his watch.

"Sometimes it is very hard to get a ricksha," said Buttercup, seeing the other's impatience. "But this boy can always find one, it just takes some time."

"I suppose . . ." said Davis absently, pulling at his ears again, then his eyes grew reflective. "But I don't see . . ." He shook his head. "I suppose you're right. She may just have been visiting somebody. Did this old man, the doorkeeper, did he seem surprised?"

"No, he just act like a doorkeeper, just dumb and not interested in what I say. He just said nobody lives at that place named Lee. So what I can do, just hang around? It seems too foolish and I don't have enough time. So I came away."

"And that was two weeks ago?"

Buttercup nodded. "Just two weeks ago and then Maguire and Miss Chen, Mrs. Maguire—" he laughed but quickly caught himself as if ashamed of it—"they saw her again by the pavilion only five days ago, but there was a big crowd and she just disappeared.

So my idea is perhaps she stays in this place, but uses her married name—Chang? Yes, Chang. So you can ask if Mrs. Chang live there. If that is no good then I will get the police to send a detective to investigate.”

Davis sat back and smiled at last.

“How’s business?” he asked abruptly.

Buttercup laughed comfortably, no longer making any effort to restrain his good humor, and his chair creaked in sympathy. “No damn good,” he said. “Because there’s no export. Maguire and I, we’re eggs men. Did he tell you? Mostly from here and Kashing. But after the export trouble gets better, we can do all right.”

“It may not get any better.”

Buttercup tried to look gloomy. “Yes, I know. Already the government want to control everything. They just choke it up. They can’t even stop if they want to. Too damn many crooks. Everybody just get some squeeze for himself. Nobody care a damn about future business. You see Shanghai—how it is. Even more worse than when the Japs are here. It’s too damn bad.” But his gloom wouldn’t last, and he ended with a disconsolate laugh that yet seemed to puzzle him as if he couldn’t see why he should laugh because it was true enough, everything was “too damn bad.”

Davis’ eyes had risen to the side door leading to the hall. Maguire had just appeared from the street, stamping his feet and shaking his coat, for a thin rain was falling.

“He will come in a minute,” Maguire called, and passed down the hall out of view. And Davis turned quickly to Buttercup, as if there were something that had to be said in a hurry.

“Before I go, Jimmy,” he said in a low voice, “I just wanted to ask you. Do you think, if I find her, there will be anything wrong? You seem a little worried, as if . . . I don’t know, but as if, I might be disappointed. I remember you were worried about her in Wuchuan—do you remember? That night before you left for Shanghai, July last year.”

Buttercup’s face was serious again. “Yes, I remember.”

“Do you still think she may have been a Communist agent?”

Buttercup laughed. “No, no. I never think it. She talked too damn much about it. So if she is, why not tell you. No, I had a idea maybe she like to make you think she was a Communist, so you

won't know what really she is."

"And what's that?"

"I thought maybe she was working for the Japanese."

Davis drew back with surprise. And for an instant the room, Buttercup, Miss Chen, Maguire, who had just come into the doorway, seemed to freeze motionless and grow dark; then slowly everything was as it had been except for a dampness on his forehead. He wasn't very well, he knew; sitting up suddenly, it was just that—a dizziness. But he could see that Buttercup was watching him with alarm.

"But that was before," Buttercup was saying. "That was before."

Just then the front door opened violently, and a servant with a gleaming umbrella appeared in the doorway.

"The ricksha has come," he announced loudly. "He says three hundred dollars to go to Stone Horse Road. He knows the place—Number Six—he knows it."

The old man blew a sharp little puff of air into his long pipe, and from the narrow bowl at the other end the ashes leapt out. He knocked the pipe gently on the side of the counter, put it away on the ledge underneath, and sat back on his stool, his feet resting snugly on the grillwork of a small brazier. Slipping his hands in the long sleeves of his dirty gray gown he leaned back against the wall and with a sigh closed his eyes to such narrow slits that he appeared asleep.

The counter was in a dark alcove at one side of the wide door into the dirty, ill-smelling little hotel. The dingy hallway ended in a court beyond which two corridors, ran off into a darkness that led, God knew where, but seemingly into something sinister and evil.

At the side of the court facing the front hall was a worn stairway that creaked and sagged at the slightest weight. The stair led to a gallery that circled the court, and was less evil in appearance by reason of having more light.

Against the wall of the hallway not far from the alcove were two stools. One was occupied by a hotel boy, who sat picking his teeth, his eyes fixed in a dull stare on the thin rain falling in the street.

Few people came and went through the doorway, and those that

did draw no interest from the boy and the old man. Like the hotel they were shabby and unkempt; the women had hard, painted faces and momentarily filled the air with a heavy smell of powder and perfume that intensified rather than relieved the unpleasant odor of the place.

Suddenly, the old man began to shake as with a fit and in a moment broke into a thin spasmodic coughing. This ended in a tremendous hawking noise. Jerking forward from his stool, he scurried round the edge of the counter to the door where he spat violently into the street. He then returned to the stool with the same shuffling scurry, and with a sigh settled back into the trance of a moment before.

But his trance lasted less than a minute for suddenly the narrow slits of his eyes opened, and into them came a little gleam. The thin yellowed skin drew back from his cheeks in a half smile and bending forward he whispered:

"Ling *Hsiao-chieh*. A minute, Ling *Hsiao-chieh*."

The object of his attention was a young woman who had just come in the door and had started for the stairs. The woman now turned with a puzzled look and came slowly to the counter. She had an attractive face, but it was lined and colorless, her lips scarcely darker than her cheeks. Only her eyes, which were a dark brown, seemed alive. They were strangely expressive eyes that now flared bright and now were quiet, as if somewhere behind them burned a flickering fire. There was a look in them, too, of sorrow and compassion, as if they had seen too much of suffering; a suggestion of fright, particularly in the way she glanced furtively from side to side.

Just now those dark, luminous, sorrowful and frightened eyes fixed on the old man behind the counter. Her lips were slightly parted and her brow furrowed in an anxious, questioning expression.

"Yes," she murmured in a voice that was soft yet had a huskiness that might have been strident if she had spoken louder.

"The small one who came here sometime before," the old man croaked. "I saw him again."

A faint light flared for an instant in the girl's eyes. "Yes?"

"He did not come in. He went by in the street."

"When was this?"

"It was two days past."

Gravely, very slowly, she nodded her head; then looked down at her blue cotton dress, at her cloth slippers which were worn and muddy. "It may be, Lao Huang, that I must move. I don't know. Let me know if this happens again. And if there is a possibility, discover his name."

She glanced up with a quick smile that had a warm and gentle sweetness, then turned and walking slowly to the stairs moved wearily up them.

The old man sat back as before; but that parting glance of hers seemed to have affected him, for on his own wrinkled countenance was a peaceful happy look.

Some thirty minutes later he suddenly sat up again. His eyes opened wide, then narrowed, and at last settled into a blank stare. Coming up the steps was a foreigner, a "foreign devil" in military clothes. This was something new at Number Six, Stone Horse Road. Even the hotel boy glanced with interest at the newcomer, and rising, ambled over to the counter to hear what he might say.

"Does Miss Lee live here or Mrs. Chang?" asked the foreigner in slow Chinese; and he produced a piece of paper with some characters written on it. "See, here it is. Either Lee *Hsiao-chieh* or Chang *Tai-tai*."

The old man's look of curiosity faded and his face became a mask, the heavy upper fold of his eyelids veiling his little eyes till they were almost out of sight. He shook his head, and sat back on the stool murmuring something Davis could not understand.

Davis turned to the hotel boy. "I can't understand Hangchow talk."

The boy shifted his stance. "Not here," he said clearly, and elaborately shook his head.

"Not here?" Davis echoed. Then pursing his lips, "How many young women live at this place?"

But the boy did not comprehend, for again he said, "Not here." Then shifting his feet, added in English, "No. Very good-uh."

Davis smiled. "Oh, you speak English." Then he glanced again at the steps. He had not been aware of anyone descending them, but there on the bottom step stood Nina.

She was standing motionless, one hand on the banister. Her lips were parted and her eyes were fixed on him with a look of incredulity and fright.

He took a step toward her, and was about to cry "Nina!" when she turned with an exclamation and fled up the stairs with desperate haste.

For an instant he stood paralyzed, then ran to the steps and leapt up them as fast as his bad leg would permit. Behind him the boy stood open-mouthed, amazed; while the old man, his face flushed bright red, impotently flapped his arms.

There was nothing rational in Davis' haste, but at the moment it seemed to him that he must not let her out of his sight. But she vanished all the same, disappearing down a corridor at the far side of the gallery. Just before he reached the corridor, a door slammed. He had no guide that he was aware of, but he knew by instinct that it was the second door on the left—a motion in the air, something. He fairly hurled himself at the door, and it yielded a crack. There was a stifled gasp from the other side. He was aware of someone pushing against it. Then the resistance vanished and the door yielded with a creak. He stepped into the room, shut the door and leaned back against it.

It was a mean little room with a small bed in one corner, a washstand in another and a closet space covered with a faded yellow curtain. Three suitcases of diminishing size stood one on top of the other near the door. Before the double window was a small window seat. She had retreated to one corner of this seat and was leaning back against the side wall, as if fearful he intended to attack her. No one had ever cringed before him in such fear, and the sight shocked him.

"Nina!" he cried, almost reproachfully. "For God's sake, what's the matter?"

Her pale lips were moving soundlessly, and her eyes remained fixed on his with unreasoning terror. She did not look the same, he thought; her face was tired and thin and her figure had lost some of its youthful fullness, but in her eyes, in the little lines about them and in the sharper molding of her face there was a new beauty.

"Why," she said at last, and in her voice was a rough huskiness,

"why do you want to see me?"

For a moment he couldn't think what to say; the question was too unexpected. Instead, he took a step toward her, then stopped abruptly, seeing her shrink away from him.

"Nina," he said at last. "I—I just want to help you. I'll do anything to help you." He paused, his face agitated and uncertain. "I don't understand. Don't you want to see me? I only want . . . somehow . . . I don't know . . . somehow to make amends."

The terror in her face had quieted a little, and in its place came a puzzled expression. Her brow had contracted and her open lips were pursed—she had never kept her lips parted like that, he thought.

"You want to help me?" she asked slowly, as if she had to strain credulity to so much as consider the possibility.

"Of course. I not only want to, I must . . . I have to. I got you into this trouble and I—"

"Which trouble?" she interrupted.

He stared, puzzled. "Hsiao Lao-pan said you were arrested in Chiangkou by the Chinese, and the Japanese captured you."

She nodded slowly, her forehead still knit, her eyes searching into his. "Yes," she said, as if to herself. "That is true." Then she turned her eyes away and stared out at the rain falling on the gray-tiled roof across the way. "But how can you help me because of that?"

His eyes were both worried and full of wonder, intense and tender. This new beauty, he thought, it was in her expression, not her features; in the lines about her mouth and eyes, and in her eyes themselves, something older, more womanly, something compassionate and fine; and yet this look of fright—it seemed fixed, not just for him. She needed help. He could see that. Everything, anything he could do.

At last her gaze came back to him. "I think," she said slowly, questioningly, "I think I don't understand you."

"No," he said. "I don't think you do. Nina, I still love you. I've found you. I don't want to lose you again."

Her lips were still parted, and again there was that look of incredulity in her expression. She was about to speak when there was a commotion in the hall, then a heavy knock on the door; and

before either of them could speak, the door opened with a crash. Into the room came the old doorkeeper, a heavy stick in his hand, and behind him the hotel boy and several other men.

They paused, surprised, even disappointed, as if they had expected to find some evidence of violence, and were now embarrassed at the quiet spectacle of the foreign military man standing at one side of the room and the Chinese girl sitting quietly in the window seat.

Davis looked at them and then at Nina. The men, too, were looking at Nina. It was clear they felt it was up to her to explain their presence.

"It's all right," she said at last. And for the first time since he had entered the room, she smiled. "There is no trouble. Please go away."

And without a word the men awkwardly retired; but once the door was shut their voices rose, upbraiding the old man for stirring them up.

"That old man," she said, as the voices faded. "He is very kind to me. He understands no one must know I live at this place."

He did not question this obscure remark; his mind was on her voice.

"Is it a cold, or is it always like this?" he asked. "Your voice."

"It is always like this," she said, dropping her eyes. "In prison—they put something in my throat, kerosene I think. It hurt the tissue."

Reassured by her dismissal of the hotel men, he had moved to the window seat; and now as he sat down, a pain shot through his left leg. He had not considered his leg in the rush up the stairs; and now it hit back at him so violently that he stiffened and the pain showed on his face.

"What is it?" she asked with quick compassion, and bending forward put a hand on the window seat between them.

But he shook his head. "Nothing," he mumbled. "Just a cramp. It will go in a minute."

"But, Davis I don't think you are very well."

"No, just a little tired. No, you're the one who's not well, Nina."

He put out his hand and covered hers, picked it up and folded it in his. She made no effort to stop him; her hand lay passive, and

she stared down at his as if it were something strange, something to be wondered at.

"Nina," he said. "You're frightened. Won't you tell me what it is. Won't you believe me, that I love you, that all these months I've been trying to find you, not just to make amends, to keep you? I'm not going home. I told you that once, but you would never believe me. It's nothing to do with pity, or feeling I should, I can't possibly help it."

He had not supposed he would say this. In Shanghai, even an hour before, he had supposed, whether he found her or not, he would in time go home. But now his words came out perfectly naturally; he did not even wonder at them. This was what he had to say, this was what he wanted to say.

He moved a little closer, and again he winced, involuntarily rubbing his leg.

She bent forward quickly and touched the top of his knee where he had rubbed it. "Oh, Davis," she cried, her face full of distress. "Let me see it. What have they done to you?" And kneeling on the floor she began thrusting up his trouser leg.

"Please," she said when he tried to stop her, and he let her have her way. Pushing the trouser to his thigh, she stared at the deep hole and ugly scar above his knee with a growing look of pain.

"It was just an accident," he mumbled, embarrassed. "When I tried to get Hsiao Lao-pan. You knew Hsiao Lao-pan was dead?"

She nodded vaguely. "Yes, I heard. A friend from Wuchuan told me, and also about you. You had some trouble, but I didn't know." Her chin quivered, and she suddenly pressed her cheek to the wound, her hands clasping his knee. "Oh, Davis, Davis," she whispered, her voice trembling with distress.

Embarrassed, he pulled her up beside him, and suddenly the reserve and fright in her seemed to melt away. She pressed against him, her head on his shoulder, her hair brushing his chin and one hand on his chest, clutching at him so desperately that he could feel her fingers digging into the flesh under his arm.

And as her head sank, her tears flowed. They were not violent tears, but steady and deep, as if welling up from the bottom of her heart. And for once he was glad of her tears. They seemed only fitting, a release and a relief. They were not just for him, he sensed,

not for his leg, and not for the moment, but for a thousand moments—for him and for Hsiao Lao-pan and all those whose suffering she had seen, or not seen but could share because she knew the pain herself, for no one in particular, but everyone, for the time and the age, and those it had hurt and destroyed.

When the tears grew quiet, she whispered into his shirt without raising her head:

"Do you mean that you want me, you want me as your wife? Is that what you mean?"

"That is what I mean."

She was quiet a moment, then slowly raised herself to her feet, drew a handkerchief from the side of her dress, and wiping her tears sat down facing him. Then she took his hand in hers.

"Davis," she said with a gentle smile that stirred him more than her tears. "What you say, I cannot say what it means. More than life . . ." She paused and glanced out at the rain. In her eyes in spite of the relieving tears, there was still that look of fear. "But Davis," she went on in her husky voice, her eyes coming back to him, "I am not the same. I must tell you this. And even in Wuchuan I did not tell you everything. When you told me you wanted to stay in China, I used to get frantic because I knew better than you it was impossible.

"I fell in love with you. Even that day when you were buying lamps, I think I was in love with you. And just because I knew it was wrong, I was worse. You never tried to make love to me. I know that. I thought it was only possible for a short time, so I must do everything to make the most possible. So I was . . . I just didn't care. I acted just like one of those women Nielsen always liked. But I didn't care as long as I could have you, everything from you. It was very selfish. I know that. I knew it then, but I didn't care because I loved you and you loved me and I knew better than you there was no time. I remember I liked to make you do things. If I could persuade you to do something I believed in, it was like . . . holding you in my arms, drawing something of you to me—it made me feel warm and glowing. But it was so selfish."

"No, not selfish," he objected. "In that sense everyone is selfish."

"Oh, yes, I was, but please let me tell you." She put a restraining hand on his arm. Her face had grown serious and there was a plead-

ing in her eyes that seemed at odds with the fixed look of fear. "Let me tell you the whole story. When you suspected I was deceiving you, I *was*—at least in a way—though it was not what you thought."

He laughed. "Not a Communist? Don't tell me you were working for the Japanese?"

She drew back a little, her face puzzled. "Why do you say that?"

"Jimmy Wang. You remember Jimmy Wang. He was worried about you. He thought you might have a connection with the enemy. He only told me just today—"

"Yes," she interrupted. "He is the most clever man you had. I knew he had some suspicion."

Davis stared, suddenly alarmed; but she restrained him again.

"Please let me tell you the story. Jimmy is quite right. Yes, it is true. I was working for the enemy. In a way, I was. But, please, let me tell you everything. I have to tell you from the beginning."

He struggled to calm his agitation; and as she talked, as minute followed minute, he slowly quieted till at last he had no expression of his own. His expression merely reflected hers, the pain or distress or excitement or sorrow that followed or mingled with one another in her eyes. She spoke in a low voice, her emotions controlled and balanced, it seemed, by the hardship and cruelty she had suffered.

In Nanking, she said, after she had deserted her husband, before she went to Changhsing and Wuchuan, she was helped by a man in the Wang Ching-wei Government, the Puppet Government working with the Japanese. This man, his name was Cheng, but that did not matter, was very persuasive.

At that time, always in fact, she had hated the war for itself. She hated the Japanese, but her chief hope was that somehow the war might be ended so that the sorrow she had known in losing her parents and which she saw about her, might end. This Cheng persuaded her that China could have made peace with the Japanese but for the recalcitrant factions in Chungking. And those factions, with the exception of a few madmen, were not against peace in their hearts; and Japan, after the American "attack"—Cheng had called it that—was only too eager for peace with China. But Chungking had come under the tyranny of the swaggering Ameri-

can militarists. The Chungking officials were not free to do as they liked. The Americans desired that China stay in the war, that she keep on dying and spending rivers of blood so that the Americans in the Pacific would not have to lose any men. And yet China had already lost millions of men, even before the American "attack," when America was making money selling equipment to Japan. And it was only when China had weakened Japan that America had come in. Her sole aim was to see that China spent a million more lives to save a few thousand Americans. China had done more than her share in beating Japan. It was time to withdraw, time to let the imperialist Allies do their own bloody work.

All this talk had stirred her bitterly, and so she had been willing to listen to a proposal Cheng had made. She needed a livelihood. Very well, he would offer her one; and one that was in the purest sense of the word patriotic. He suggested she go to Free China and report to him through connections that he had in various cities what the Americans were doing. Her reports would be used as propaganda material to stir up the people against the Americans, or so Cheng said. This would help precipitate a crisis in Chungking, and in the end would bring a break between Chungking and the Americans; then China would be free to make peace with the Japanese.

She agreed to his proposal and went to Changhsing and later to Wuchuan. When she wrote to Cheng that she was in Wuchuan, he said someone would come to see her to give her instructions. She stayed in Wuchuan more than a month, and at last a man came to see her. His name was Wang. He was a small business man who did contract work for General Huang. He seemed nervous and frightened, and kept pointing out that if she wavered in her work, she would have difficulty. They had connections in the Kuomintang Secret Police, he said. And the trouble was she had already begun to waver. Though Free China had lost much of its spirit of resistance, still the air seemed better—the people whatever they might be were not puppets, not slaves of a foreign master; and what she heard of the three Americans in Wuchuan was not bad; they lived quietly enough, they did not dictate to the officials, and they paid promptly for everything they bought. But in spite of these observations she was still convinced that the way to bring

peace to China was to rid the country of the Americans.

At Mr. Wang's suggestion she decided to try and get a job with Captain Russell because he was doing intelligence work. Their meeting was quite natural, but even so she was frightened. Also the night he first interviewed her she was nervous. He had said so, she remembered; he had asked her to sit alone with him in the other room, and she had been afraid to lest she be unable to act naturally. But after they had talked awhile, she saw he was perfectly innocent, and she was not nervous any more.

She was glad to go to Changhsing. She liked the Captain, and had an entirely personal desire to show him that she could do a good job. The Communists were a strange revelation. She admired their feeling for the common people. They talked to her for hours, and she became convinced that the only thing wrong with the Americans was that they had too little cooperation with the Communists. She liked Colonel Blakeslie, even if he once embarrassed her; he was so cheerful and so careless about risking his own life.

By the time she returned to Wuchuan she had decided to give up her connection with Cheng. She wrote him a letter, saying she could not do the work; then she borrowed enough money to pay him back—it was very little. After that she was free. But there was still Mr. Wang. He came to see her quite often, and was always very angry. She told him not to see her, and she said if he tried to do anything to her, she would expose him. One of these times she discovered that Mr. Wang was just a tool. This discovery was quite accidental. Mr. Wang showed her a letter promising her more money if she did as she had promised. But he gave her the wrong letter. It was a note to Mr. Wang and was signed by the name Tien Li-fa.

She gave the note back to Mr. Wang and pretended she had not read it. Mr. Wang then gave her the right letter, but seemed very disturbed.

She did not see him so often after that, but several times he threatened her and said they both might be exposed if she did not change her mind; once he said something might happen to Captain Russell. She could not bear either thought, and yet she knew someday Cheng or Tien would move against her. And so the idea became fixed in her mind that before long she would have to leave Wu-

chuan, to run away and disappear.

Her first real shock came that night in Pinghsien when he mentioned a coded letter she had received from Cheng in Nanking. That terrified her, but when she reached her room and could think more calmly, she could see he thought it was from the Communists. And she thought if she went to Chiangkou and found some evidence of the missing radio, everything would be all right again. It was her fault, the loss of the radio, but it was only carelessness, not deception. She thought she might have another six weeks before she had to go away for the last time. She said six weeks for a special reason. Because of this same special reason—she would explain in a minute—she had decided not to run away to the Communists but to a school friend in Changchow in Fukien, where everything was peaceful.

In Chiangkou there was no one. The Communists had gone north. She had heard from Maguire that the Navy had left some supplies in Chiangkou at the Huang Shan Hotel. So she explored the hotel. It was empty but in one room she found a piece of paper scraped off a box. It was called "a Bill of Lading" and it mentioned something about radio supplies. She thought it very fortunate and was very pleased, but when she reached the street a curious thing happened.

"You met a fat man in a black coat," he interposed. "Mr. Lin?"

"No," said Nina. And before she could say another word he knew who it was, though he had no reason to know it.

"Mr. Tien," he said.

"Yes, it was Mr. Tien." Mr. Tien seemed very surprised to see her, she continued, and they walked to the river together. She explained to him why she had come to Chiangkou, and he asked her if she knew people suspected she was a Communist. She said yes. Then he warned her she should be more careful because some day she might be arrested, then she would lose her good position as Captain Russell's Number One Concubine. Those were not his words, but that was his meaning. It made her furious; and she said a very foolish thing. She said that Mr. Tien should also be careful and not write notes to Mr. Wang or he might lose his good job with his bank. Mr. Tien's face did not move and for a moment he did not say anything. Then very coldly he said that perhaps she really was

a Communist. That was all. Then he went away. But as they hunted for a boat she grew frightened and told Hsiao Lao-pan they must leave Chiangkou right away. And they started walking up the river bank. But they were not a *li* beyond the town when two men stopped them.

The men were well-dressed and carried pistols under their coats. She knew at once they were agents of the Secret Police. They took her and Hsiao Lao-pan back to Chiangkou, and put them in the local prison without saying a word. It was dark and dirty. There were no other prisoners. No one came into the cells. Then in the early morning there was a sound of firing in the distance, and later in the day two Japanese soldiers appeared, and they were taken before an officer who told them they would be taken to Hangchow. He would not explain why, and when she asked him a second time he threatened to have her beaten.

They were put down in the hold of the junk and given very little to eat. It was dark and wet and miserable, but after three days the officer in charge, who was more friendly than the one in Chiangkou, allowed them to sit on the deck. But one evening when the officer was asleep, some of the soldiers got drunk and tried to attack her; and when Hsiao Lao-pan objected, they threw him in the water. The officer woke up, and the men were frightened and fired their guns at Hsiao Lao-pan and said he was trying to escape. That was the last time she saw Hsiao Lao-pan.

The next afternoon the junk reached Hangchow. She was forced to stay in the hold that night. Then the next day she was taken to a Japanese military prison. She could not remember it very well because she had a fever. But one day the officer who had commanded the junk came to see her in the prison. He brought her a blanket, and talked to her in a whisper. He said it had been reported by an agent that she was on a mission to collect information for the Imperial Forces, and had failed in this work, that soon she would be sent to the Gendarmerie Headquarters in Shanghai for questioning and treatment. She knew what that meant; torture, perhaps death. But, said the officer, if she consented to his "protection"—he put it very politely—it might be arranged to have her "disappear" and the report against her destroyed.

It was easy to decide. She accepted the suggestion. At the time

she might have preferred to die. But there was a reason she did not wish to die.

And Nina paused in her story to stare out the window, then her eyes came to his; and they were shy and full of pain and hesitant.

"That night in Pinghsien," she said. "I wanted to tell you. I told you I thought in six weeks I would have to go away. You see, in me there was your child. That was also the reason I wanted to go to Fukien, where it was peaceful, and everything could happen in a proper way. It was cruel to tell you. But I was so pleased, and so proud. I thought even if I lose Davis, still I will not lose him entirely. But later I was glad I never told you, then you did not have to worry. In Hangchow because of the child I accepted the suggestion of the officer."

She looked away unable to bear what she might read in his eyes and went on with her story in a rush, as if desperate to finish with the recollection of those days and root them out of her memory forever.

She was moved to a pleasant house. There were two other girls in that house, one was a Japanese. Each had a separate apartment. Yet even if the house was pleasant, it was a prison. There was a guard at the door and she was not allowed to go out, only to walk in a garden in back. The officer was kind enough, but often he gave parties for his friends; and they drank too much. There were other girls. It was disgusting. In the spring her officer went away. Then one day a friend of his, a major, whom she hated, came and said her friend had been killed, that now she was his property by a previous arrangement. But she refused because the time was near for her child. Then the major attacked her. The next day she couldn't get out of bed; she was too sick with fear and hate. The major came to see her again and he brought a medical officer; she did not understand their purpose, and she let the doctor examine her. He gave her some medicine, and she went to sleep. When she awoke, she felt sicker and weaker than ever. And the child was gone.

That was in April, only a month before the child was due.

The discovery crushed her. At first she decided to kill herself. Then she planned to kill the major. But when he came to see her, he came with friends. Always they were drunk. She did not want

to speak of those days. Her spirit broke. She didn't care; she had no more strength to die than to live. But one night two of them had a fight. They were very drunk. The third one had gone to sleep. One of those who were fighting hit the other with a bottle and then approached her; but she pushed him away, and he fell. His head hit a table, knocking over the lamp. And the room caught fire. For awhile she just watched it. She thought she would just sit there and die with the three men, all of them together. But the heat drove her out of the room; and she ran down the stairs. And in the confusion, she found the door unguarded and escaped to the street. It was a strange feeling to be free; it gave her courage. Not courage to live but to die. So she ran to the river. It was very dark, and she thought no one saw her. She liked the feeling of the water closing about her.

When she awoke, she was in a hospital. That was in May. How she was rescued, or by whom she never discovered. It was a Chinese hospital but it was supervised by the Japanese. No one knew her, however; and she was permitted to leave. She no longer wanted to die; she wanted to earn enough money to travel to North China and find her uncle. She told a doctor at the hospital she was traveling to Shanghai, and had lost all her money, everything. He gave her a job, not because she had once worked for a doctor, but because he liked notes and prescriptions written in English.

She stayed there a month. Then one day on the street she saw a man she recognized. It was one of the two men, who had put her in prison in Chiangkou. She did not think he had seen her but the next day, she saw him again. This frightened her so she ran away to Shanghai.

On the train to Shanghai a strange thing happened. A Japanese officer sat opposite her. She did not know him, but he kept watching her. She grew frightened. At a railway station, when she took a walk on the platform, he snapped a photograph of her. That frightened her more. She thought perhaps he would use this to identify her, and expose her to the Japanese Gendarmerie, or the Secret Police of the Kuomintang. So when he was dozing, she tried to steal the camera to destroy the film. But he caught her. He was very curious as to why she wanted to steal his camera, and she

could only say it was because she did not like her picture taken. He said he had taken it because she had an expressive face. After that he did not pay her any more attention, but when the train reached Shanghai she was arrested.

She was sent to Bridge House, the headquarters of the Gendarmerie, and put in a cell with forty men. It was so crowded no one could lie down. She was questioned again and again about the camera; sometimes she was stripped naked and beaten on every part of her body. It was there that her throat was injured. Sometimes they would burn her with cigarettes, sometimes hit her instep with a chopstick hour after hour till it was swollen like a balloon; but she did not tell them anything. At last they sent her to another prison as a common thief. The day before the end of the war she was set free.

She was afraid to see her friends lest some of the authorities know about them, and she was ashamed because she looked like a beggar. Instead, she went to a hospital. She had a bad cough and her body was covered with scabies. The doctor at the hospital was astonished because her Chinese was not a beggar's Chinese and because she spoke to him in English. She told him the Japanese had imprisoned her, and he took her to his home. She might have stayed in Shanghai, but so many Government officials were coming there that she grew fearful lest she be discovered. Some of her friends learned about her because she went to see them to get some clothes she had left in Shanghai two years before. So when she heard that another doctor, she had known before the war, was in Hangchow, she wrote to him and came back to Hangchow to work with him because Hangchow was quiet and she felt there was less danger there, now that the war was over.

That was in September. She had been in Hangchow ever since. But some day when she had enough money, she still hoped to go to North China, to Tientsin, and find her uncle. Also she had some cousins in Tientsin, her mother's family. But now she was happy enough. There were times when her work gave her a wonderful satisfaction, and so she was content.

When she had seen him at the bottom of the stairs, she could only feel he had come to accuse her and she could not stand that. That seemed worse than being arrested.

Nina paused, looked at him searchingly, then away at the rain. There had been tears in her eyes several times during her story, and now they came again. Her own handkerchief was wet through, and he drew one from his pocket. Reaching out, he would have dabbed at her eyes, but she took it from him.

Sitting back, he stared away from her a moment, struggling with his feelings. He felt sick and cold inside, there was a terrible, grinding anger and bitterness. He could feel the pain of it. He wanted to reach out at someone, anyone who had hurt her or was a friend of those who had hurt her, and crush them in his hands. But he knew it would only add to her distress if he let his feelings have their way.

"You are still frightened," he said at last. "I can see it in your eyes. And here you don't use your own name, do you?"

"My name is Ling," she said absently. "Everyone calls me Ling."

"Yes, but now the war is over. These things that were so terrible during the war, they mean very little now. Your man Cheng may have been shot. Mr. Tien is not in China; he has gone to Formosa—probably for his political health. The puppets and the Japanese are finished. They're in the past, and the Communists are back north. And if you want to go to Tientsin, I can help you."

He fumbled in his pocket. "Here is something that will surprise you." And he thrust five American one hundred dollar notes toward her across the window seat. "It's just to help you, whatever you want to do . . . not a present, just back salary, whatever you want to call it."

She stared at the money a moment, then smiled up at him, her eyes gentle and compassionate, and made the brighter by a thin mist of tears. "Yes," she whispered, "I will go to North China. I will go soon. It will be safer." Her voice faltered. "You are too kind. . . ."

"Will you wait for me?" he asked quickly. "Or do you want to go ahead? I can get discharged in less than a month. They want to send me home, but I can get around that—it won't be hard."

She was looking at him incredulously again, her brows drawn together and her lips parted. "What do you mean?" she asked. "I thought you just wanted to help me. This money . . ."

"Help you. Of course, I want to help you."

"But now you say you want to go with me. It is not necessary to go with me."

"But I thought you understood," he said, his expression as incredulous as hers. "I want you to be my wife."

She stared a moment, and then shook her head as if to brush away some cloudiness before her eyes. "You mean . . ." her voice grew more halting. "You mean . . . after all I told you, everything . . . all this, all this, you . . ." Her chin quivered and again her eyes filled with tears

He did not reply but moved close to her, and again her head sank on his shoulder; her breath stirred uneasily, and neither of them could speak.

CHAPTER XXIV

Thoughts on a Train

It was after five.

"We had better go," he said.

"But how can I go like this?" she pleaded, now laughing now looking down at her muddy feet and wrinkled dress with feminine distress.

He watched her happily. Already, he thought, there was a faint color in her cheeks.

"It's only Miss Chen and Mr. Hsiung and Jimmy. They won't mind how you look."

"No," she said, a faint mischief in her eyes. "I have agreed to everything you want so far: go with you, leave the hotel, leave the medical work. So now you must agree with me just once. It will only be half an hour."

"Why half an hour? It doesn't take that long to change a dress."

"No, I want to take a bath. Just a standing-up bath. So please wait outside. You can wait downstairs."

"Can't I just turn my back?"

She laughed, and her cheeks grew pink. "No, no, please." And she pushed him to the door.

"All right, but hurry."

"I tell you. Just take a walk up the street to the Lake. It is very beautiful. There is a pavilion across the road by the water. You can see the mountains. On a clear day you can see almost to Nine Dragon Peak."

At the door he kissed her, smiled down at her thin delicate face and into her dark eyes, kissed her again, and walked away down the hall.

She watched him a moment with a tragic agitated expression and her lips parted as if she wished to call out to him, then they trembled, tears welled up in her eyes, blotting him out; and she quickly closed the door.

He went down the stairs one at a time, giving his leg the best of care. In the hallway he hesitated, then noticed the rain had stopped and moved out to the street.

In a few minutes he reached the lake, Hangchow's famous West Lake. It was as she had said, very beautiful. There were few people on the road, and the little pavilion built out into the water was empty. He sat down slowly, lit a cigarette, and stared about him. In the distance was a small boat with a single sail. Willow trees fringed the embankment, their branches swaying gently, slowly in the faint breeze. Across the lake on the far shore stood a massive tower, an ancient pagoda. In the distance rose the gray-green mountains of West Chekiang.

Somewhere on the far side of that range lay Wuchuan. It would be quiet now, he thought, pleasanter. The over-border trade was gone. It would lapse back into a sleepy little town of tea and silk. At the Temple there would be dissolution and silence, a slow sinking back into the decay he had found almost two years before. It would be interesting to return some day, not now, in three years, five years, when the past was forgotten, when there was peace in the land, and climb Nine Dragon Mountain. The interior was the best of China, not the coast.

Suddenly, he was aware, without seeing the change, that a flood of pink light had come into the western sky, as if the clouds were about to break. He saw it first in the water, then on the sail of the little boat in the far distance to the south. It was a lovely sight; and with it came a ripple of wind, stirring in the trees, and lapping noisy little waves against the stone foundation of the pavilion. In the cold wind was a clean taste of earth and water that he drew into his lungs as if drawing in new life.

In the wind and the change in the sombre sky there was, he thought, something of himself. Everything had been so sombre, dark, indefinite. Now it was clear and definite again. This past year, which only that morning on the plane from Shanghai had seemed to be ending in such a tangled morass, now was straight again, a road that led on across the hills, a river that reached the sea.

It was not just what he ought to do, it was what he wanted. She was sick, wounded; she needed him, needed him more than

Sarah ever would.

It would be best to settle in Peking. This phobia of hers would be less there and in time he could work her clear of it. It was only a matter of time. Mr. Wu had even suggested Peking, Peking or Shanghai; and whether or not Peking was a better place to work, it was at least a better place to live. A Peking house was a legendary thing.

He smiled thinking of himself and Nina in their Peking house, with a lotus pond and a plum tree in the garden, trips to the Western hills. And with a feeling of exuberance he stood up, stretched till he stood on tip-toe, then beat his chest.

But in a moment he subsided abruptly, glanced furtively about him to be sure no one had seen him, looked at his watch and turned slowly toward Number Six, Stone Horse Road.

As he lifted his left leg carefully up the steps, the old doorkeeper came from behind the counter.

"She has gone out," he said.

Davis looked puzzled.

"She has gone out," the other repeated, his wrinkled face impassive, his eyes half-closed. Then he produced a letter.

Davis opened it quickly. It read:

"Davis dearest,

Even now I cannot be completely honest with you. I was too weak not to explain. But I know you would just try to persuade me, and I would give in to whatever you said.

I am going away. Going away for good. I must do it. You see I am still being hunted. You think everything is all right now but that is not true. It may be worse soon. You see, it is not because of helping the Japanese. Nobody cares too much about that. It is because they think I try to help the Communists. So they want to catch me again. And someday they will try. I am not safe anywhere, not even in Communist territory. But don't worry. I shall kill myself first. I shan't suffer again.

This sounds strange but it is no worse than many people suffer in China these days. And I refuse to allow you to suffer because of me. You might even be condemned also.

Davis, please go home. You have your wife, your country, your work. You don't belong here. You belong in your native country-

side. This is a dark time for China. It can only hurt you. Please go home, and let me think of you as living a good, free, useful life, and it will be a happy life. I know it. And believe me, my dearest, I have never regretted the time we had together. It is like a wonderful spring morning, just thinking about it. I can always be happy thinking about it, but I could not be happy if I thought you were dragged down into this awful condition.

Please don't remember me just the way I am now. On the boat going to Pinghsien was best. I enclose a photograph if you like to have it.

I will always think of you, Davis, and always pray for you.

I love you—

Nina.

He glanced at the photograph. It was of the Temple, Nina and Miss Chen, standing arm in arm, laughing. He could see how much stronger she was in those days, her cheeks fatter. But he only glanced at the picture. Stuffing it and the letter in his pocket, he walked to the stairway and moved deliberately up them.

But the room was empty, there were not even any bits of paper, no torn letters. There was no evidence at all. Everything of hers was gone.

Downstairs he spoke to the boy, to the old doorkeeper, but they both shook their heads. They did not know where she had gone. She had gone off in a ricksha; that was all they knew. Then he peered behind the counter to see if there was any baggage, anything.

At last he simply stood by the counter, his face pale, his eyes lost in thought. He tried to think if she had told him where she worked, the name of the doctor; but if she had, he could not think of it. Then he thought of Maguire and Buttercup, they could help. There would not be too many doctors in Hangchow.

He stood up and walked slowly to the street. A man was just pushing his ricksha into the curb a few feet down the street as he came out the door. As he approached the man turned with a cheerful smile and waved an inquiring hand. He nodded absently, climbed into the ricksha and motioned him ahead.

He took the letter out of his pocket, read it again, and stuffed it back. As he did so, he noticed something white, his handkerchief,

and tried to push it back in his pocket. But it would not push. He raised himself, and saw it was caught between the cushion and the side of the ricksha. He pulled it free, and blew his nose, then paused, the handkerchief still in his hands. He stared down with a puzzled frown. The handkerchief was almost soaking wet.

Then he smiled suddenly. Of course, he thought, of course; she had taken it. He sat back, studying the ricksha man jogging rhythmically along between the shafts.

"Are you a Hangchow man?" he asked.

"No," said the man, looking back with a cheerful grin that showed his gums as well as his teeth. "Nanchang, Kiangsi."

"A Kiangsi 'cousin'?"

The man laughed, and they talked a moment in friendly fashion.

"Before you carried me, you carried a young lady with three bags," said Davis.

"Not wrong," said the man.

"I am supposed to go to the same place, but I don't remember the street or the number. Is this the right way?"

The man nodded. He knew the place well. It was an *I-yuan*, a small hospital. He had carried this woman there, and just the day before he had carried a man there, a large fat man with a lump on his cheek. He knew it well.

When they reached the hospital it proved only a private clinic. A servant came to the door and asked him in.

"Is Miss Ling here?" he asked.

No, said the servant. She had just gone out. She had just gone out with Dr. Tsai. Where they had gone, he did not know.

Dr. Tsai, he thought. There was a Dr. Tsai in Wuchuan, who lived in the country, a friend of Nina's.

"You mean Dr. Tsai Tze-yu?" he asked.

Yes, yes, said the servant, that was his meaning.

And when would they come back?

The servant scratched his head. Perhaps Dr. Tsai would come back in about an hour. But Miss Ling, perhaps she would not come back. Yes, she had said she would not come back.

Davis jumped up impatiently.

"Well?" he asked.

Buttercup came smiling into the room, bowing like a puppet in a puppet show. Then he raised his hat, tipped it to Davis, then Miss Chen and laughed genially.

"Everything is all right. Just ask James Wang. Everything is okay, damn fine. We can just take a train to Shanghai tomorrow." Jimmy looked about the room. "Where's Liping-ah?"

"He's working on my damn fine report for Colonel Crump. What's so damn fine?"

Buttercup smiled enigmatically, slowly took off his overcoat and sat down. He drew a piece of paper from his pocket and turned up the lamp.

"I arrived there just at eight o'clock, and Dr. Tsai is just coming back. He was just coming from the railway station. He was very surprised to see me because we didn't meet since Wuchuan days. So I had a long talk with him. I told him about you and about Nina—some of it. And he seems to understand the situation already. So I told him I think, you think, Nina is just running away from herself. And he said, yes, it was true. He said she was sick, mentally sick; she works all right but sometimes she gets damn nervous, and her hands shake. One day he found her in a small room. She said there was a man looking for her in the next room; but there was no man at all—nobody. Not anybody."

Davis nodded, his face set.

"So he told me, he think it's a good idea if someone like you just try to help her. And for this reason he told me the address in Shanghai where she send the baggage. Also he gave me the name of her cousin and where he live in Tientsin. He thinks she will go to Tientsin; but he says please don't say he said anything." Buttercup took out a pencil. "I just write the English name, too."

He handed Davis the paper.

"Also he said," Buttercup continued, "that her body is not very strong. It has too many bad scars, and there is some injury to her throat. He is afraid some day it will make a lot of trouble."

Buttercup paused, smiled, spread out his hands. "That's all." Then as Davis' head bowed over the paper, the eyes of the fat little Chinese grew brooding and almost imperceptibly he shook his head.

The train jolted, rolled on a little, jolted again, then with a squeaking, grinding complaint and a faint hiss of steam came to an abrupt stop. Ahead of them the locomotive whistle sounded plaintively. In the sudden stillness the voices in the compartment rose loudly. By the door on the aisle were two American soldiers, evidently medical corpsmen; near the window, next to Jimmy Wang, sat Davis.

He had not been listening to the two soldiers but now he could not help it.

"Wheatina with cream—real cream—and white sugar, no more of this brown stuff." And sitting back, the soldier who had just spoken let out a noisy whoop. "Home to Uncle Sugar, yes, sir, home to Uncle Sugar. Think of it, George. Home to Uncle Sugar."

He had been saying "Home to Uncle Sugar" for some time, and Davis turned his mind away; but a remark of the other drew his attention back again.

". . . we gave it all to the hospital, their military hospital," he was saying, "and last week, damn if Czynowski and I didn't find half a box of the quinine in a store in town. It just shows you can't win . . . that Dr. Wang, he'd sell his grandmother for glue if she had any fat on her. . . ."

His grandmother was just what he would not sell, thought Davis.

"It's the whole crowd," said the first soldier. "They're all the same. You remember Goodsby, the fellow with the broken arm. He told me he bailed out over some goddam mountain, some godforsaken place, and all the way down he was yellin' 'If you're not scared, you're a bloody sonofabitch.' And when he hit the ground, he busted his arm, and then he fainted. But that's not when he fainted. Some Chinese jumps out of a bush, pulls out a carton of American cigarettes, and offers him a package for two dollars gold. That's when he fainted." The train had started and the rattles and creaks grew and synthesized into a general rumble that drowned the voices at the other end of the compartment, and Davis turned to the window. His own people always irritated him, not just criticizing the Chinese, but criticizing them openly; they just didn't give a damn. They had no instinctive courtesy. It was a form of arrogance that made his spine crawl, arrogance or ignorance.

Why not sell a package of cigarettes, anyway? The man had bought it at an outrageous price from someone else who had bought it at an outrageous price from an American soldier. In Shanghai the American M.P.'s would have stolen it back, and hit the man over the head as a black market racketeer. And yet if anyone along the line was crooked, it was the American. China had no monopoly.

But one thing was true. By and large the individual at home could expect an equality of justice before the law. Human rights still had significance. Here they didn't. It was a question of friends, privilege, money, power. For those who had none of these, or not enough, there could only be hope of obscurity, hope of hiding and avoiding the predatory rape of human rights. He hated to admit it but it was possible, all too possible that Nina had reason to fear.

Beyond the window lay an endless expanse of small streams, brown rice fields, gardens, white washed farms, clumps of trees; a fertile watery land gliding by in the bright November sun. Here and there were torn sections of barbed wire, sentry towers, eroded embankments, trenches full of water—all the panoply of the one time conqueror already crumbling into the hungry earth of China.

Then his eye fixed on a white egret standing motionless in a distant field, warily poised lest the rumbling train move too close. The creeks and streams seemed to cross and re-cross each other in an endless maze. He could understand the trials of those few hardy westerners who had escaped from Shanghai prison camps during the war.

A new thought came to him; he smiled and murmured something in a scarcely audible voice.

Buttercup beside him raised his head. "What do you say?"

Davis laughed. "Nothing. I was just quoting. Patting myself on the back. I feel happy, Buttercup. The world's all right. Everything's clear, the road is straight and definite."

"But you didn't find her yet."

"Yes, I know. But I will. Somewhere, somehow."

Buttercup's eyes closed and he vaguely shook his head. Definite?—it seemed anything but definite, this friend of his throwing away everything he had for a string of uncertainties in a chaotic uncertain land. And yet perhaps he was wrong and his friend was right. Perhaps true certainty was in a man's heart—the straight and cer-

tain road of his integrity, his finest instinct. Life might knock such men every which way, even destroy them. And if it did that, then it was life that was indefinite; it was the world about them that failed, that disintegrated into filth and rubbish, not they. Their road held true.

He had known such men; one sat beside him.

And yet, was it not better to compromise? At least a little. Yes, it was better.

Buttercup's round head now began moving slightly up and down instead of from side to side. Then it sank to his chest; and in a moment a faint, monotonous sound rose from his lips, like the sound of steam rising from a kettle. He had fallen asleep.